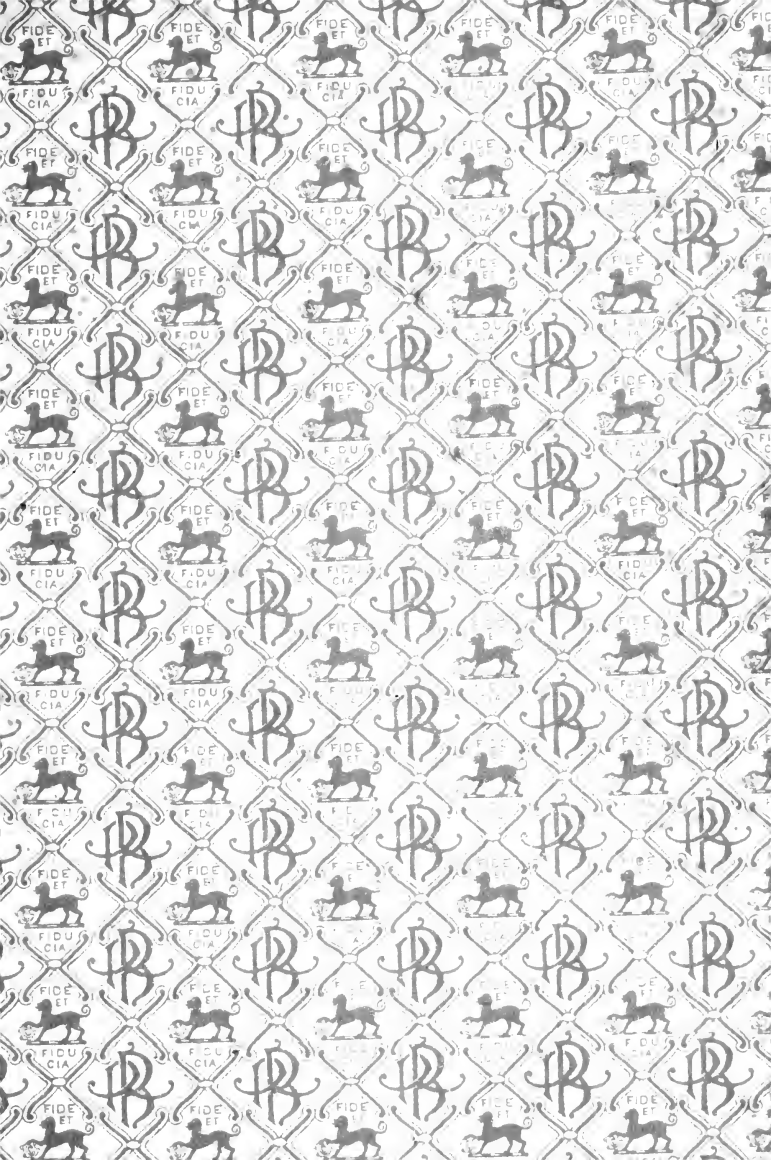


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MR. CHAINE'S SONS



# MR. CHAINE'S SONS

A Nobel

BY

W. E. NORRIS

AUTHOR OF 'THIRLBY HALL,' 'A BACHELOR'S BLUNDER,'  
'THE ROGUE,' ETC.



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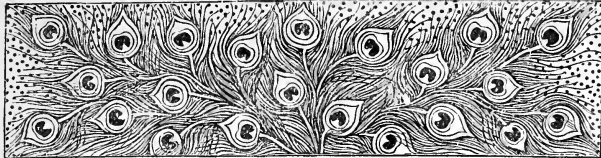
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# MR. CHAINE'S SONS

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A FAMILY CONFERENCE

IDA, having disposed of her breakfast with such appetite as excitement and agitation had left her, perused Barton's confession for about the twentieth time. Though ungrammatical, ill-spelt and eccentrically punctuated, it was perfectly clear and coherent. It set forth in plain terms the motive of the crime; it contained a terse description of the encounter which had brought about Leonard Fraser's death; and it terminated with a phrase which seemed likely to prove disagreeable reading to certain persons:—'Them as have not come forward to clear Mr. John Chaine is worse nor

Me, because it were not to save their Necks as they let him suffer for what he never Done.'

Perhaps so ; but what was still unexplained, and apparently inexplicable, was the fact of John's flight from the country. Ida, with her woman's wit, divined that Wilfrid could explain this if he chose. It was by John's flight that Wilfrid had profited, and, considering what a muddle-headed person poor John had been, it seemed highly probable that his flight had been prompted by Wilfrid's representations. At all events, it behoved her to lose no time in putting herself in communication with the latter personage, to whom she accordingly wrote and despatched the following note :

'DEAR WILFRID—I wish to speak to you about a matter of very great importance both to you and to me. As it is one with regard to which I think I ought to take immediate steps, I hope you will be able to call here in the course of the day. I shall be at home the whole afternoon, and perhaps you will kindly send me a word of reply by the bearer.

' Yours very sincerely,

' IDA CHAINE.'

Her messenger returned within an hour, bringing a verbal answer : ‘ Mr. Chaine’s compliments, and he would be at the White House between three and four o’clock.’

This was, so far, satisfactory ; but it left Ida with a good many hours of suspense and impatience upon her hands. She could not settle down to any occupation ; she doubted whether she ought not to have gone to Mrs. Barton and prepared the unfortunate woman for the additional blow which was about to fall upon her ; she hardly knew why she had granted any respite to the unprincipled schemer who had certainly deserved no such consideration from her. However, she got through the time somehow or other, and exactly as the clock struck three she was relieved by the ringing of the door-bell.

‘ Now,’ thought she to herself, ‘ I shall hear the truth at last. He will be obliged to tell me the truth, because no lie can serve him when he is confronted with this paper. Only I must keep cool, and take care not to set him on his guard against

betraying himself by anything like an accusation.'

If she had kept her head as cool as it ought to have been she would not have forgotten to give instructions to the effect that she would only be at home that day to one individual. The result of this negligence on her part was that, when the door was thrown open and 'Mr. Chaine' was announced, she had the vexation of beholding Hubert, not Wilfrid, walk into the room. It was unfortunate; but there was no help for it, and she tried to look pleased as she rose to receive her visitor. Hubert, who, for his part, looked extremely dejected, did not notice any diminution of her accustomed cordiality, but, after shaking hands with her, dropped into a chair, saying:

'Look here, Ida; I've got into a most confounded difficulty, and I'll be hanged if I can see my way out of it. Perhaps you'll give me the benefit of your advice.'

'Of course I will,' answered Ida promptly (for in truth she was above all things anxious to get rid of him as soon as might be); 'and

you needn't trouble to tell me what your difficulty is, because I believe I know. You have had the audacity to propose to Violet Stanton, and she has had the folly, or the honesty, to accept you—isn't that it?'

'Oh, she has told you, then?' asked the young man eagerly.

'Only a few words, spoken in a great hurry; there wasn't time for more than a bald statement of the fact. Your difficulty, I suppose, is that you don't quite know whether you are engaged or not, and that you doubt whether you ought to consider yourself so until you have money enough to support a wife.'

Hubert signified that this was an accurate conjecture. 'The trouble is,' said he, 'that her mother won't have me at any price, and that she herself won't consent to an engagement without her mother's leave. One can't complain of that, and I don't complain; only the question is what is a fellow to do in a position like this? If we were a hundred miles apart, it would be right enough; but,

living in the same place, we couldn't very well help meeting even if we tried, and how am I to behave when we do meet?'

'I think, do you know,' answered Ida, smiling, 'that I should leave that question to her.'

'You would, eh? Well, I must confess that that was my own idea at first, but Wilfrid rather put me off. He said it was one's duty as a gentleman to avoid any occasion of causing embarrassment to a lady; and I'm afraid that's true, you know. Then he said I had had no business to propose to her at all—which is true too. I don't want to take any advantages that I'm not fairly entitled to; I'm game to keep out of her way and pass her with a bow and all that; only, don't you see, I shouldn't like her to misunderstand me.'

'That is to say that you want me to act as a go-between and explain your magnanimity I am quite willing to burden my conscience with that peccadillo, if there is any need for it; but my belief is that Violet has courage enough

to stand to her guns, and that, as you have neither of you done anything to be ashamed of, you may respectfully snap your fingers at Mrs. Stanton. I wouldn't take Wilfrid for my guide again, though, if I were you. He isn't disinterested, and — and I am by no means convinced that he is honest.'

Hubert took little heed of an observation which had been more or less intended to provoke inquiry. He merely remarked that Wilfrid was a hard-headed sort of chap, but not more hard-hearted than his neighbours, and proceeded to catechise Ida upon a matter of greater immediate interest to him. Did she really believe that Violet would brave delay and suspense and eventual privations for his sake? Had she any reason for so believing? Candidly and honestly, was it her opinion that obvious obstacles might in the long run be surmounted?

To these and many other queries of a like nature Ida responded as well as she could and with remarkable patience. Only when she realised that there was no immediate prospect

of her visitor taking himself off, she made up her mind to say: 'I expect your brother Wilfrid presently. I sent for him because I have something to tell him which you also must hear of before long, and perhaps you had better hear it now.'

She then briefly related the story of her husband's innocence and Barton's guilt; whereby Hubert was greatly moved. 'Poor old John!' he exclaimed. 'I never believed that he had killed that fellow, you know; I always felt sure that the truth would come out some day; and now it has come out—and it's too late! What an infamous shame!'

'Yes,' answered Ida slowly, 'it is an infamous shame—if anybody is to blame for it. Of course Barton was to blame; still, it is a good deal to expect of a rough, half-educated man like that that he should put his own neck in a noose to divert suspicion from one who had already escaped. Perhaps there may be some refined and educated people who are capable of acting quite as cruelly with less temptation.'



Hubert's eyes met hers. He understood her meaning, and his colour came and went rapidly.

'For God's sake,' he pleaded, in a low, horror-struck voice, 'don't let us allow ourselves to think such things until we know a little more! You may not like Wilfrid, and I daresay he *is* rather a selfish sort of beggar in some ways; but it doesn't follow that he is the very worst rascal that ever lived. And that's just about what he would be if he had had any hand in this business. No, no! you may depend upon it that he would never do a thing like that! Besides, when you come to consider of it, how *could* he? The extraordinary part of it all is that John should have put himself in the wrong by bolting. Wilfrid could hardly have persuaded him to do that.'

'I don't know: somebody must have persuaded him that he was a murderer,' said Ida; 'that is the only possible explanation of his conduct.'

Hubert thought it quite conceivable that John might have wandered out later in the night, have come upon the dead body and

concluded, in a moment of panic, that what he saw was the work of his own hands. He was beginning to suggest this alternative explanation when his lips were suddenly closed by the entrance of his elder brother.

Wilfrid stepped forward, smiling and unconcerned ; for he had no inkling of what was in store for him. He had placed a mistaken interpretation upon his sister-in-law's missive, having hastily assumed that the announcement which she wished to make to him was that of her engagement to Arthur Mayne. Now, since he asked nothing better than that she should engage herself to Arthur Mayne or any other man, and thus place him in possession of the dower-house which ought to have been his, he was prepared to deal very leniently with her, although he meant to take this opportunity of cautioning her against ill - advised meddling with certain love-affairs which were no concern of hers. He was, therefore, a little bit annoyed to find Hubert in the room, and he threw a half-compassionate, half-interrogative glance at the young man, as who should say :

‘This is really rather bad taste on your part. You aren’t wanted here, and you ought to have sense enough to know it.’

But Hubert looked grave and immovable, and Ida, almost before he had had time to seat himself, told him why he had been summoned.

‘I have some news to give you that is both good and bad,’ said she. ‘It is good because poor John can now be proved innocent of the crime that he was made to suffer so terribly for; but it is bad because he is dead, and we can never make amends for the wrong that we did him. It was Barton, the gamekeeper, who killed Mr. Fraser. He died this morning, after having made a full confession to me.’

Wilfrid’s face expressed nothing except the sorrow and consternation which such intelligence was of a nature to arouse. He had had no suspicion of Barton, of whose existence, indeed, he had scarcely been aware; but he had always reckoned upon the chance that the manner in which Leonard Fraser had met with his death might ultimately be revealed.

Happily, both his father and his brother were dead and buried; so that it really did not very much matter. He requested particulars, perused carefully the document which Ida handed to him, and, as he returned it to her, remarked, with a sigh :

‘I suppose we must accept this as being a true statement. Whether we shall do any good by making it public or not I hardly know.’

‘It shall be made public : I’ll take my oath of that,’ broke in Hubert abruptly.

Wilfrid turned his head towards the speaker, smiling in a surprised and slightly disdainful fashion. ‘Oh, well—if you think so,’ said he. ‘There is no reason why it shouldn’t be made public; only, of course, we know that instances of self-accusation are not uncommon, and it may be doubted whether this unfortunate man was in his sober senses when he claimed to have murdered his master. Anyhow, I am afraid a great many people will be incredulous, and it is worth while to consider whether we should be wise to rake up the ashes of a

scandal which has pretty well burnt itself out.'

'That is as much as to say that you don't care whether your brother is remembered as a murderer or as a victim,' cried Ida, losing control over herself. 'Perhaps that doesn't signify to you, though it signifies a great deal to me ; perhaps—in fact I can well believe it—you would rather not be called upon to explain how it was that he fled to America when you must have known, even if he did not, that there was no case against him.'

'That's straight enough, at all events,' muttered Hubert, who was scrutinising his brother with mingled curiosity and apprehension.

Wilfrid had turned a shade paler, but that was only natural, and he did not look like a guilty man as he answered, in a tone of grave remonstrance : 'My dear Ida, you are excited, and I am sure you cannot realise the meaning of what you say. If, as you assert, I had known that there was no case against poor

John, I should never have allowed him to leave the country ; but unfortunately there was a case—a very strong case. Now that all is over, I may tell you (though perhaps it would be more prudent on my part to hold my tongue) what I did not choose to reveal at the inquest. You may remember that I saw you for a few minutes that evening, and that I told you John had drunk too much wine and had had a scuffle with Fraser. That was perfectly true, and that was what I said in answer to the questions put to me at the inquest ; but I didn't say that, after I had left you and was walking home, I was horrified by stumbling over poor Fraser's corpse. I acted, as it seemed to me, for the best ; I hurried back and told John what I had seen ; the shock brought him to his senses ; he declared at once that he must run for his life, and I hadn't the heart to dissuade him. You may say that I ought to have dissuaded him, and that his innocence would have been established if I had ; but I can't feel certain of that even now.'

‘Then it *was* by your advice that he ran away,’ said Ida. ‘I thought as much.’

‘No ; not by my advice—only with my assent. You must remember that I did not really know what took place during that short tussle. I thought at the time that it was simply a matter of a blow given and returned ; but John stooped or fell over the man after he was down, and I could not have sworn that he didn’t choke him. Moreover, the proceedings at the inquest were published in all the newspapers. John must have seen those newspapers, and if he never laid hands on Fraser’s throat, why didn’t he come forward and say so ?’

Hubert drew his breath in, with an air of profound relief. ‘There it is, you see,’ he remarked, addressing himself to Ida ; ‘the poor old chap must have imagined that he was guilty, and upon my word, I don’t think Wilfrid could have acted otherwise than as he did. As he says, there wouldn’t have been any certainty of an acquittal if John had stood his ground.’

‘I can’t understand,’ answered Ida stubbornly, ‘how it could be possible for anyone to imagine that he had strangled another man unless he had really done so.’

‘Or attempted to do so,’ observed Wilfrid. ‘The mystery, I am afraid, can never be cleared up now; but your difficulty is likely to be the one which will suggest itself to most people. That is why I ventured to doubt the advisability of making this curious confession public. At the same time, we ought, I feel, to be guided by your wishes in the matter.’

‘My wish and my intention is to do my duty,’ returned Ida coldly. ‘Nothing could possibly justify us in keeping Barton’s statement secret; and it is so evidently true that I think it will be generally believed — even though you may do your best to throw discredit upon it.’

‘Oh, come! that’s hardly fair, Ida,’ remonstrated Hubert, who was all the more ready to take his brother’s part because he was guiltily conscious of having harboured unworthy suspicions of him; ‘Wilfrid isn’t trying



to throw discredit upon the story ; he's only trying to prepare you for a certain amount of incredulity—which I dare say we shall have to contend against. We can't fight the women, you know, we must let them say what they like ; but if any *man* takes it into his head after this to tell me that my poor old John was a murderer—well, I hope I shall know how to deal with him.'

He looked quite cheerful at the prospect of instilling faith into the sceptical by the method of Mahomet, and indeed the honest fellow was better qualified to distinguish himself in the fray than in argument. Ida could say no more. She was aware that she had brought an accusation against Wilfrid which it was out of her power to substantiate ; but she made no apology, nor did he care to demand one. The two brothers presently went away together, taking with them the document to which it was agreed that publicity should be given through the medium of the press ; and Ida was left to reflect upon the change brought about in her personal situation by the gamekeeper's tardy avowal.

Not much time for reflection was granted to her; for Wilfrid and Hubert had hardly been gone five minutes when another visitor was ushered into her presence. She had not expected to see Arthur Mayne that day; but there he was, and he had a look of joyous confidence in his eyes; and so, hardly knowing what she was saying, she exclaimed:

‘Oh, I am so glad you have come! Such a wonderful thing has happened!—the murderer has confessed, and it can be proved now that John was condemned unjustly.’

Arthur, as has already been said, felt little sympathy with the scruples by which she had hitherto been restrained; but he was ready enough to take advantage of their removal, and as soon as he had listened to her narrative, he hastened to draw a practical conclusion from it.

‘Then,’ said he eagerly, ‘there is no longer anything to keep us apart.’

Ida made no reply; but she looked up at him half timidly, half hopefully, and a minute later he knew all that there was any necessity for him to know.

‘We are not going to worry ourselves about the past,’ said he decisively, in answer to certain incoherent protestations of hers; ‘we are going to put it out of sight and live for the present and the future, like sensible people. I have told you before, and I tell you again, that the past is nothing to me. Why should I care, now that I know from your own lips that you have always loved me?’

‘Yes; that is true, God knows!’ acquiesced Ida; ‘but perhaps I ought not to have loved you all along, and at any rate I love you too much to bring disgrace upon you. I will never marry you until it has been acknowledged everywhere that my husband did not commit the crime which he was supposed to have committed. Wilfrid seems to think that this won’t be acknowledged.’

‘Wilfrid be hanged!’ returned Arthur contemptuously. ‘A written confession, properly signed and attested, must carry conviction to all unprejudiced minds. Added to which, it is utter nonsense to talk about your bringing disgrace upon me. What may very possibly

be said is that I am anxious to share old Mr. Chaine's money with you ; but—does it really matter a farthing what is said ? If you think it does, nothing is easier than to hand over the legacy to the residuary legatee.'

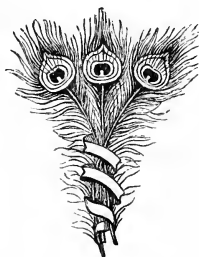
But this was not quite what Ida wanted. Woman-like, she was disinclined to despoil the man whom she loved for the benefit of one whom she detested ; she adhered, moreover, to her resolution that she would contract no second marriage until she should be absolved from having participated, however indirectly, in the catastrophe which had wrecked her first ; finally, she was of opinion that a rather longer period of time ought to elapse before she could decently announce her re-engagement to her friends.

Arthur, somewhat reluctantly and after a good deal of discussion, yielded to her entreaties. He thought all those hesitations and misgivings uncalled for, and he said so ; still, since she made a point of giving effect to them, he would not gainsay her. It was agreed between them that their engagement should

remain a secret until after the coming winter was over; meanwhile, he was to have the privilege of seeing her once every day during the brief remainder of the vacation, and of writing to her as often when his work should have recalled him to London.

‘Only it is as certain as anything can be that we shall be found out before we think that we have betrayed ourselves,’ he remarked with a smile.

‘Yes; but that is never quite the same thing,’ was Ida’s sage rejoinder.





## CHAPTER XXXIV

### VIOLET YIELDS A POINT OR TWO

WILFRID CHAINE was not much disquieted by the news which it had now become his plain duty to promulgate. For choice, he would have preferred to let sleeping scandals lie ; still, since John was dead and gone, it really could not make any great difference whether an act of deferred rehabilitation was performed or not, and he had wit enough to perceive that he ought to be the first to perform it. Accordingly, he lost no time in taking such steps as seemed to be requisite ; and within forty-eight hours every inhabitant of the United Kingdom who knew how to read had an opportunity of perusing Barton's dying confession.

This, as may be supposed, caused no small sensation, several of the London daily papers devoting leading articles to the subject, and

none of them failing to draw attention to the singular circumstance that the late Mr. John Chainé had done everything in his power to brand himself with the crime of which he had until now been presumed guilty.

‘If,’ observed one of those sapient scribes whose mission it is to express in print the sentiments of an inarticulate public, ‘we are to accept as authentic the statement which we have quoted elsewhere—and the *bona fides* of the deponent appears to be guaranteed—we can only assume that the unfortunate gentleman whose death in one of the Western States of America was reported some time back was the victim of an extraordinary hallucination. It is possible, upon that assumption, to pity him ; it is possible, and indeed only natural, to sympathise with his relatives ; but it is not possible to affirm that, if a miscarriage of justice which was only averted by the incapacity of the police had actually taken place, anyone would have been to blame for it except Mr. John Chainé himself.’

Thus was put into fitting words the irrita-

tion which every sensible Anglo-Saxon must needs feel against a man whose behaviour has exposed him to unmerited penalties. People shouldn't do such things; they shouldn't be victims of hallucinations or circumstances or any rubbish of that kind; and if they choose to conduct themselves in so bewildering a fashion, they really must not afterwards demand, either personally or vicariously, to be compassionated. Wilfrid, it need hardly be said, had not deemed it incumbent upon him to inform the general public of an incident which he had confided to Ida; so that no one thought of ascribing his late brother's evasion to any promptings on his part. It was remembered that his evidence at the inquest had been somewhat reluctantly given; it was believed that he had hitherto shared the universal opinion as regarded his brother's guilt, and around the tea-tables of St. Albyn's there went whispers to the effect that perhaps, even now, he might know a little more than he cared to reveal.

'Not,' observed Mrs. Pickersgill, 'that one



would dream of condemning him, poor fellow ! And I do think it is most wicked of people to suggest that he or Mrs. Chaine might have made it worth Barton's while to sign a false statement on his deathbed. I, for one, will never believe that ; although I must admit that I can't tell how to reconcile Barton's confession with what we know to have occurred.'

Perhaps it was rather a pity that Ida should have assisted Colonel Fraser in making some provision for the murderer's widow and children ; but it may be pleaded in extenuation of her imprudence that she scarcely appreciated the lengths to which malice and sheer stupidity can go. For the rest, these were not obtruded upon her notice. Everybody was very kind and sympathetic ; all the old ladies told her how sincerely they rejoiced in her deliverance from a load of sorrow which ought never to have been laid upon her shoulders, and by no one was she more affectionately congratulated than by her very reverend father.

'My dear,' the Dean said, 'I cannot tell you what a relief this is to me. I have not,

as you know, liked to speak much or often to you about poor John ; I have felt that I could say little which would not give you pain. But now, thank God ! we can talk of him freely ; we can think of him as one to whom the injustice of this present world has now been amply atoned for, and you can consecrate the remainder of your life to his memory, looking forward to a happy and eternal reunion with him hereafter.'

It was in the Dean's study that the above beautiful and elevated sentiments were enunciated. Ida was paying him one of her periodical visits, and as the good man sat beside his writing-table, with his chair slightly pushed from it, with one muscular leg crossed over the other, and his large white hands folded, he looked the very incarnation of honest piety and benevolence. His daughter, it must be confessed, did not look like that at all ; she had, to tell the truth, the appearance of being provoked, impatient and rather disgusted. Her reply, however, betrayed no unbecoming or undutiful warmth.

‘Of course,’ said she, ‘I am very glad and very thankful that John should have been shown to be innocent of Mr. Fraser’s death; as for my being eternally reunited to him, there is some doubt about that, is there not? Nobody knows what Heaven means; but I thought one of the few things we had been told with regard to a future state was that there will be no marrying or giving in marriage there. I mean, if there were, the position of those who have married twice, with the sanction of the law and the church, would be a little uncomfortable.’

The Dean’s brow clouded over. ‘The subject is a difficult one, and ought not to be lightly treated,’ said he. ‘Human nature being what it is, second marriages cannot be condemned, and may, in certain cases, be even pronounced expedient; but I do not think that yours is such a case, my dear. No; yours is assuredly not one of those cases, and it would grieve me very much to hear that you were allowing your thoughts to turn in that direction.’

She really could not tell him that she was, although she had at first had some intention of so doing. She felt that he had a right to know what might for the present be legitimately concealed from the rest of the world ; but she also felt sure that the prospective grief at which he had hinted would be due to nothing more than regret at her folly in abandoning a commodious dwelling-house. Probably she was a little unfair to the Dean, who, if he was a hypocrite, was at least unconscious of hypocrisy ; but it was not in her character to make much allowance for human frailties, nor could she easily forgive anybody who had once deceived her. She changed the subject and soon went away, thinking to herself that, in any event, she could do no harm by keeping her own counsel for a few months. She had not, after all, given any distinct promise to Arthur Mayne as yet.

Now it came to pass that, after she had emerged from the cathedral precincts and was walking down the High Street, she heard herself hailed by name, and, turning round, became aware of a young lady, seated in a

high dog-cart, who presently drew up alongside of her.

‘I was on my way to your place,’ Violet said. ‘Are you going home?—and can I give you a lift?’

‘Well—thank you,’ answered Ida, glancing doubtfully at the vehicle and at the raw-boned animal in the shafts. ‘I was thinking of walking; but I don’t mind a drive, if it is safe. That huge creature won’t run away, will it?’

‘That he most certainly won’t,’ replied Violet, laughing. ‘He is Wicks’s old stager, who is always put into double-harness with the young ones, and who knows a great deal too much to expose himself to unnecessary risks. Jump up; I’ll give you a hand.’

Ida, after another moment of hesitation, complied; and although the horse appeared to be quiet enough, while her charioteer was evidently no novice in the art of driving, she breathed more freely when the winding, narrow streets had been left behind and the open country reached.

‘Does Mrs. Stanton like you to go out quite alone like this?’ she could not help asking.

‘I don’t think she approves of dog-carts,’ Violet confessed; ‘but then she doesn’t know that I am in a dog-cart at this moment, so she won’t be uneasy. I sometimes deceive her—it saves such a lot of worry, you see—but I never do anything really dangerous.’

‘I wasn’t thinking so much of the danger as of the impropriety,’ remarked Ida.

‘Am I doing anything improper? Well, perhaps so; but one may as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb, and, as you know, I have been guilty of something much worse than driving a few miles in a two-wheeled trap behind this staid old crock.’

‘No; I shouldn’t say that you had. I am no great believer in the rights that women are so fond of claiming for themselves nowadays, and I don’t think that we consult our own interests by attempting to do all the things that men do; but I do think that the right of choosing our own husbands

ought to belong to us. And, as a matter of fact, it does belong to us, provided that we have the courage to insist upon it.'

'Ah, yes; but that requires a lot of courage—more than I possess, I am afraid. I can defy my mother; but I am not sure that I can defy poverty, or that there would be anything to brag about in it if I could. The great difference between men and us is that we don't mind submitting to small daily privations for the sake of those whom we love and that they do. It isn't their fault; they are constituted like that. So it wouldn't be fair to call me selfish for refusing to engage myself to a man who is too poor to marry; I don't fear poverty for myself half as much as I do for him. Perhaps you might find some opportunity of telling him that.'

'Wouldn't it be more convincing if you were to tell him yourself?'

'No; because he could only make one answer, and I have placed myself under his heel by admitting that I love him, and that, if I don't marry him, I shall never marry at

all. I have thought it all out, and it is perfectly clear to me that I mustn't bind him down in any sort of way. Of course one knows what will happen—he will be disconsolate for a week or two, and angry for another week or two, and then he will gradually become resigned: that is what always does happen. Only I should be glad if you could make him understand that I am not altogether given over to the worship of filthy lucre.'

Ida had a good deal to say in reply. A full report of the prolonged debate which ensued would scarcely interest the reader; but the upshot of it (is not that the upshot of most debates?) was to leave matters very much where they had been at the outset. Ida was constrained to admit that a marriage contracted in defiance not only of common sense but of the prohibition of one's only surviving parent and guardian, is not a step to be recommended, and also that very little more can be said in favour of an indefinite engagement; Violet, on the other hand,



avowed that she would be willing to wait any number of years for Hubert Chaine, though she demurred to the advisability of telling him so. Thus, when the two friends parted, neither of them had changed her point of view, nor had either of them yielded to the arguments advanced by the other. However, it was tolerably well understood by both that a channel of communication had been opened between Violet and Hubert which might be utilised for the allaying of possible misgivings and misapprehensions, and even, upon very rare occasions, for the interchange of mutual assurances. Perhaps this result was not entirely unsatisfactory to the younger woman, while it seemed to present elements of encouragement to the elder, whose last words were :

‘I will answer for it that Hubert will remain true to you as long as you remain true to him. As for speaking to him when you meet, you must do as you think best ; only, since your mother hasn’t positively forbidden you to speak to him, it seems to

me that you would be justified in throwing him a word or two every now and then, just to preserve him from despair. You are not compelled to cut him because you can't see your way to accepting him as your husband.'

Violet had mentioned that she sometimes deceived her mother, and, so far as riding and driving were concerned, she was, for the reason that she had given, not above doing so; but she was too honest and too proud to consent to any clandestine assignations with a man whose visits Mrs. Stanton had forbidden and whom she herself was fain to acknowledge as an impossible fiancé. Therefore, notwithstanding Ida's unscrupulous suggestions, she took some trouble to avoid crossing his path; and how could she help it if he chose to follow the hounds, like so many other people? So at length a day came when, finding herself close beside him on the edge of a covert, and perceiving that he was looking at her in a side-long, questioning way from beneath his eyelids,

she thought it best to take the bull by the horns and say something to him.

‘Fine scenting morning,’ was the striking and original remark which recommended itself to her.

Hubert murmured some perfunctory rejoinder and looked more interrogative than ever. Several other members of the hunt were within earshot, so that she could not at once reply to his unspoken query ; but in the course of the next few minutes she found an opportunity of saying in a hurried undertone :

‘Oh no ; you needn’t look the other way when we meet ; we haven’t quarrelled, and it would be absurd to behave as if we had. The only thing is that we must not *try* to meet.’

‘But must we try *not* to meet ?’ asked Hubert, his face brightening.

‘Well—yes ; I suppose so,’ she answered, with a slight laugh. ‘The hunting-field hardly counts ; one has something better to do than to talk when one is out hunting ; that is, if one has any luck.’

Hubert may have thought that, under the peculiar circumstances of the case, ordinary definitions of luck required modification; but he was preserved from giving utterance to so heretical a sentiment; for at this moment a whimper was heard, which caused Violet to gather up her reins and trot off towards the corner of the covert. Immediately afterwards the fox had broken, the hounds were in full cry, and Hubert, less on the alert or less keen than his late companion, got away rather badly. However, as he was well mounted and always rode straight, that did not matter quite so much as it would have done in a more open country. Parts of Southshire are somewhat awkward riding for nervous persons; at this early season, too, the country was still blind; so that by the time Hubert had ornamented his horse's nose and knees with samples of the soil and his own face with a long diagonal scratch, he found the field pretty well scattered, while he himself was gaining rapidly upon the few who were ahead of him.

Prominent amongst these was Violet, sailing easily along and (as the admiring hussar did not fail to note) sticking closer to her saddle than many a man would have done. 'That's a game little animal of hers,' Hubert muttered; 'but I'll be hanged if he looks like a comfortable one to sit! I wonder whether he always jumps as big as that.'

Violet would have told him that the point criticised was really one of Bob's chief merits. His habit of jumping like a buck was not, to be sure, quite comfortable for his rider; but she was accustomed to it, and it made him very safe. Moreover, Southshire is a country of banks rather than of fences and brooks. Nevertheless, there were some fences to be negotiated just now; at that very moment a big and black one was before her, at the sight of which Bob was cocking his ears. It really looked almost too much for the little horse to manage; but he took it splendidly, arching up his back, tucking his legs under him, and never so much as touch-

ing a twig. Alas! in that moment of triumph a very sad thing occurred. Violet, as has been said, sat tight; but no human being could have helped being moved a little forward by that tremendous jerk. She was thrown against the pommel; the pommel broke off short, and—Miss Stanton left.

She landed comfortably on her hands and knees, and was not a bit hurt; Bob, though naturally perplexed by a catastrophe which nothing in his previous experience of his mistress could have led him to expect, threw himself back upon his haunches and stood gazing at her with an air of surprised inquiry. She was perfectly capable of remounting without assistance, and would have done so, had she not suddenly become aware of an officious person who seemed to think that he had caught her horse for her.

‘I’m all right, thanks,’ said she rather impatiently; ‘I wish you hadn’t stopped! This is what comes of buying cheap saddles.’

Hubert Chaine had picked up the broken pommel and was shaking his head over it.

‘No thanks to the scamp who made this thing that you didn’t break your neck,’ he remarked. ‘Just look at it!—that’s no more made of iron than you are.’ Then, as she had already twisted her fingers into Bob’s mane and apparently expected to be given a leg up, he added decisively: ‘Oh, you can’t follow the hounds any more to-day, you know; it’s out of the question. I’ll see you safe home; but we mustn’t go out of a walk. You might as well attempt to ride bare-backed as in that saddle.’

There was, at all events, little likelihood of her seeing any more of the run after such a loss of precious time. Perhaps she may have been influenced by that reflection, or perhaps (for there is no accounting for the queer inconsistencies of women) she may have rather liked being addressed in dictatorial accents to which she was quite unaccustomed. However that may have been, she sighed and answered humbly: ‘Very well; I’ll go home, then. But it isn’t in the least necessary for you to come with me.’

Hubert briefly declared that he intended doing so. And it was not until he had helped Violet to mount once more, and they had turned their horses' heads towards St. Albyn's that he condescended to explain his behaviour.

'I'm only doing this out of a sense of duty to Mrs. Stanton,' said he gravely. 'She may not wish me to speak to you, and I dare say she doesn't; but I am sure she would wish any man who happened to be at hand to take care of you, now that you have met with an accident which makes it quite unsafe for you to be left alone. Of course I won't speak unless you give me leave; but, if I might be allowed, I should like just to ask one question: Does your mother think you ought to go out hunting without any—er——'

'Without any chaperon? No, she doesn't. Since you must have the whole truth, I am always supposed to be chaperoned by somebody, and there generally is somebody. To-day, I admit, there was nobody; so you



are at liberty to be shocked, though there isn't really anything to be shocked at. I can see by your face that there would be very little liberty for me, if——'

'Oh, but then I should go with you, don't you see,' interrupted Hubert eagerly; 'it isn't the impropriety that I mind, it's the risk. Suppose you were to have a nasty fall some day?'

'Well, then I presume that somebody would be humane enough to have me carried on a hurdle to the nearest public-house. Even you could do no more than that.'

Hubert pointed out that more certainly could be done and would be done by any one who possessed the requisite privileges. He was proceeding to enlarge upon the theme that he did, after all, possess certain privileges, although they had not been formally granted, when she, in her turn, interrupted him.

'It is useless to talk like that!' she exclaimed. 'I am not engaged to you, and I thought you understood that I had distinctly refused to be.'

‘But you do love me, Violet—you said you did.’

‘Yes, I know; and most likely I oughtn’t to have said so. What I ought to say is that I can’t consent to treat you as anything except an ordinary acquaintance.’ However, she did not say this: possibly she may have felt that that, too, would be a useless way of talking. She had, in fact, little to urge in opposition to the pleas which he put forward. He spoke very moderately and sensibly; he expressed his willingness to submit to any decision of hers, only asking her to believe that, whether he was held at arm’s length or not, his feelings would undergo no change; but at the same time he ventured to remind her that it was not a matter of absolute impossibility for them to marry even upon what he had, while it might be regarded as certain that his income would increase as he grew older. Mrs. Stanton’s veto was an obstacle, no doubt; but surely there were occasions on which a daughter was entitled to disregard her mother’s veto.

‘This isn’t you; it is Mrs. Chaine,’ observed Violet at last, when she was driven to bay; ‘I can recognise her style in every word that you say. It isn’t a bad sort of style, as styles go, and very likely I myself might excel in it if I were as well off as she is. What would you and she have me do? Am I to tell my mother that I am determined to marry you upon twopence a year—or is it only a kind of half-and-half engagement that you want?’

‘Oh, it’s nothing half-and-half that *I* want,’ answered the young man laughing. ‘I can’t speak for Ida, and I wasn’t speaking for her; but I know well enough what my own wishes are.’

These he was so good as to formulate, and Violet was able, without much difficulty, to show him how completely inadmissible they were. On the other hand she was persuaded, after a long and animated parley, to make certain further concessions.

‘I wouldn’t think of suggesting that you should deceive your mother in any way,’

Hubert declared virtuously ; ‘but if you tell her point-blank that we can’t get on without meeting occasionally, I don’t see what right she will have to complain.’

That Violet should have tacitly acquiesced in this remarkably limited definition of a parent’s rights was perhaps sufficient proof of her readiness to acquiesce in anything and everything that he might be pleased to dictate ; but he did not push his advantage too far, being indeed quite contented for the present with a success which had surpassed his most sanguine anticipations.





## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE ST. ALBYN'S DIVISION

MRS. STANTON passed for being a silly woman, and had perhaps earned her reputation ; but everybody must have noticed how surprisingly clever silly women often show themselves when placed in dilemmas which are apt to prove disconcerting to the other sex. Probably it was intuition rather than any process of close reasoning which prompted her to give way when her daughter, as in duty bound, flung something like a defiance in her face, saying : ‘I can’t cut him ; that is certain. There is no engagement, of course, and most likely there never will be one ; still he knows that I would marry him to-morrow if only he had a little more money, and I am not going to treat him as if he had insulted me because he happens to be poor.’

‘Well, my dear,’ Mrs. Stanton replied, ‘no doubt you think that you know best. I won’t forbid you to speak to the man, whatever I may think of his taste in speaking to you, and although I can’t allow him to come to the house. I can say no more than your own good sense has already told you: it is utterly out of the question that you should ever marry him; so that it would have been better, I should have supposed, to have dropped him quietly. However, you must do as you like about it; it is no fault of mine that he is without the means of supporting a wife and family.’

The most astute of diplomatists could not have assumed a safer attitude. Violet had a head on her shoulders; she was not romantic, although she was inclined to kick against opposition; she fully realised the disadvantages of pauperism, and, so long as she was not thwarted by her mother, the chances were that the common sense with which she had been justly credited would lead her to logical conclusions. Moreover, Hubert Chaine could

hardly be described as a dangerously fascinating individual. He was good-looking; but good looks are the least important of a man's attractions, just as they are the most important of a woman's; and nothing, upon the face of it, seemed more probable than that to see a great deal of him would mean to grow weary of him. Mrs. Stanton, therefore, was doubtless well-advised in abstaining from prohibitions and committing the future to the inexorable sequence of events.

Thus several weeks passed away, during which this semi-detached pair of lovers met every now and again and were free, if it should so please them, to exchange vows of eternal fidelity. It was, however, agreed between them that their meetings should not be preconcerted, and, as a matter of fact, these proved less frequent than one of them could have wished. With only one horse it is difficult to hunt more than twice a fortnight, nor is it on every hunting day that happy accidents take place.

Meanwhile, Ida did what she could towards

keeping up the spirits of her two young friends and confidants. Both of them visited her constantly, and each found in her a sympathetic listener; for, as Arthur Mayne had now returned to London, she had leisure to devote her whole attention to their joint and several perplexities. What she hoped to obtain in the long run, though she was too sagacious to urge it at the outset, was Violet's consent to a period of comparative poverty. Being herself no longer poor, she felt convinced that poverty is not in the least incompatible with happiness, and her belief was that the girl would eventually come to feel as she did.

'Everything depends upon yourself,' she would say; 'your mother can't really prevent you from consulting your own inclinations, and, after all, you are both very young. You can well afford to wait awhile; though perhaps it wouldn't be prudent to wait *too* long.'

One thing Ida was not aware of, and would not have been much disturbed if she had been aware of—namely, that Wilfrid was at this time prosecuting his suit with no little



assiduity. It was not under her roof that Wilfrid's attentions to Miss Stanton were paid, for ever since the announcement of Barton's confession there had been a decided coolness between her and her brother-in-law, which neither of them had cared to conceal or dispel; but it was no uncommon event for the owner of Chainé Court to fall in with Violet when she was on her way homewards from the White House, and on such occasions he did not fail to make the most of his opportunity. The girl neither encouraged nor discouraged him. She understood, of course, that he was making love to her; but she cared so little about him that she did not think it worth while to meet his advances with a downright rebuff. Plenty of men had made love to her before him; she attached very little weight to masculine fancies; it may be also that she had to some extent taken his measure, and surmised that a refusal would not leave him inconsolable.

The curious thing is that that surmise,

notwithstanding its plausibility, was incorrect. Whether it was Violet's good-humoured indifference, or her personal beauty, or that something which never can be defined that worked Wilfrid up by degrees to the pitch of falling genuinely and deeply in love with her signifies little: all that can be said is that this phenomenon actually occurred, and that no one could have deplored its occurrence more sincerely than its victim. He deplored it, that is to say, at certain moments: there were others when he almost gloried in it. The variations in human nature are, after all, scarcely greater than the variations in the temperature of the human body; so that there really is not (if people would only believe it) so immense a difference as we are inclined to suppose between ourselves and a downright rascal like Wilfrid Chaine. Wilfrid's actions were not hampered by any faith in God or Devil; good and evil were to him nothing more than conventional terms, bearing a purely conventional significance; yet he recognised, because he could not help

recognising, that there are emotions which elevate and emotions which degrade ; and he rejoiced occasionally, because he could not help rejoicing, to find that he was still capable of experiencing the former. From this it will be gathered that he must have been quite seriously in love.

His intentions, at any rate, were serious ; and he gave evidence of them by not only calling upon Mrs. Stanton but asking permission to repeat his visit. It is needless to add that his intentions were divined, and his request gladly acceded to by that anxious mother.

‘I am always at home at five o’clock and shall always be delighted to see you,’ she hastened to say. ‘My daughter also is generally in by that time ; but I can’t be sure of her during the hunting season. Things have altered so much since my young days, when very few ladies thought of hunting. I hope you are not one of the people who disapprove of their doing so.’

Wilfrid declared that he was free from any

such unreasonable prejudices. He thoroughly approved of fox-hunting, he said, as a pastime for all men and women who could engage in it without danger to themselves or others; he himself fully intended to go out; perhaps it might be his good fortune to share the honours of a run with Miss Stanton ere long.

That, however, did not prove to be his good fortune, although he sought it assiduously. Like his younger brother (who, by the way, no longer asked him for advice, and of whose rivalry he was not in the least afraid) he suffered many disappointments through betaking himself to distant meets which Violet's solicitude on behalf of her mount did not permit her to attend. But he had the pull over his younger brother inasmuch as he was enabled to converse with her upon more than one occasion across her mother's tea-table. And at such times he had the satisfaction of finding her amiable and well-disposed towards him. He was upon his best behaviour; he was very anxious to please her, and he knew

how to be pleasing. Violet was always glad to see him ; as his visits became more frequent she grew accustomed to seeing him, and even missed him when anything occurred to prevent his turning up as usual.

One evening he dropped in at the accustomed hour, with an air of suppressed excitement which she at once noticed and of which the cause was speedily revealed to her.

‘Did you see that old Marston is dead?’ he asked, while she was handing him his teacup.

‘No,’ she answered ; ‘I never look at the papers. It may be a very disgraceful confession to make ; but the truth is I didn’t know old Marston had ever been alive.’

Mrs. Stanton was better informed. ‘My dear,’ she exclaimed reprovingly, ‘you are not thinking of what you are saying ! Of course you know that Mr. Marston was our member. I did see this morning that he had suddenly dropped down dead from heart-disease. Very shocking, and most distressing for his family, poor things ! Still, as he was a Radical—but

then I'm sure I don't know whether we have any chance of getting back the seat. What do you think, Mr. Chaîne ?'

Mr. Chaîne thought that if a strong candidate could be found there might be a very good chance indeed. He enlarged at some length upon the political situation. Southshire had always been a Conservative county, and had for many years returned a staunch Tory as one of its representatives in the person of his late father ; but his father had retired ; then had come the redistribution of seats, the enfranchisement of the agricultural labourer and other local disturbing causes which had resulted in the election of a Gladstonian. There was, however, reason to believe that the St. Albyn's division was already repentant ; Mr. Marston had not been popular ; the Unionist party had devoted a good deal of time and trouble to the task of organisation and the only question seemed to be whether a man of adequate talent and position in the county could be induced to come forward.

To such a remark as that there was

obviously but one answer to be made, and Mrs. Stanton made it with as much smiling alacrity as if it had been an entirely original and unsolicited suggestion of her own.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ rejoined Wilfrid, not ill pleased, though he affected an air of indifference; ‘there are plenty of older and more experienced men in the county than I, and of course no overtures have been made to me as yet. If it were represented to one as a matter of duty, I suppose one would have to stand; but contested elections are a great bore, besides being a great expense, and I should want some rather strong inducement to persuade me to face the nuisance of the whole thing.’ He added, with a side-glance at Violet, ‘Is it worth any man’s while to be ambitious on his own account when he has nobody to be ambitious for him?’

‘Oh, we are all ambitious on your behalf,’ she replied laughing; ‘we should be quite proud of you as an acquaintance if you got into Parliament and made speeches. Of course you would have to make speeches, because a

mute M.P., like Sir Harvey Amherst, reflects no credit upon his county; but then you would be sure to make speeches—and good ones.'

Wilfrid was aware that the girl was indulging in that kind of irony which becomes so feeble a weapon in a woman's hands; but he also thought (and indeed he was not far wrong) that when a woman attempts to be ironical, it is because she wishes to conceal her true feelings. Therefore, after a little further conversation, he went away tolerably happy, as well as tolerably convinced that Miss Stanton coveted for him the political success which he had always coveted for himself. Now, it was only reasonable to assume that if she desired him to succeed in any respect, she must be interested in him, and if she was interested in him—well, the chances were that she was not too much interested in that ridiculous young brother of his. As he was on his way towards the livery-stables where he had left his dog-cart, whom should he meet, ambling up the High



Street, but the Dean of St. Albyn's; and the Dean stopped him for the express purpose of asking whether he had heard of poor Mr. Marston's demise.

'Everybody is saying,' that exemplary ecclesiastic remarked, 'that you are to be our new member. Of course, in my position, it would be improper to show any partisanship; still a man cannot help holding his own views with regard to politics, and I trust there is no harm in my expressing a hope that the rumour which has reached me is correct.'

'I really know nothing at all about it,' answered Wilfrid; 'no steps can possibly be taken until after the funeral, and not a word has been said to me upon the subject as yet. I don't say that I should refuse to present myself as a candidate if it could be shown to me that a majority of the electors wished me to do so; but that is rather doubtful, isn't it?'

The Dean was of opinion that there could be very little doubt about that. While disclaiming any special information or means

of obtaining it, he said that he had been much struck by the unanimity with which those whom he had chanced to encounter in the course of the day had named Mr. Wilfrid Chaine as the inevitable successor of the deceased member, and he made so bold as to add that, in his poor judgment, Mr. Wilfrid Chaine would neglect what was at once an opportunity and a duty were he to refuse this chance of serving a cause to which his good father had devoted the greater part of an active and useful life.

Now, Dean Pemberton was a cautious man and one who had ever been averse to committing himself without good reason for so doing; nor was he the only person who addressed Wilfrid in encouraging terms before he left St. Albyn's that afternoon. In short, it was abundantly evident that, should he decide to come forward, he would not lack supporters, and during the next few days informal representations to that effect reached him from various quarters. If he did not attend the funeral obsequies of the late Mr.

Marston nor lay a wreath upon the coffin, it was not from any want of gratitude to that misguided politician for having died so opportunely, but only because he feared a possible misconstruction of his motives on the part of the ill-informed. To tell the truth, he had at one time rather thought of being a Liberal Unionist; but he was now quite sure that he had better be a Tory, and it was in that character that he ultimately issued his address to the electors.

Of these a large and influential body at once determined to call together a public meeting, at which it was hoped that Mr. Chaine would be pleased to expound his views orally and at greater length. A building known as the Hall of Recreation was secured for this purpose; a platform was erected at one end of it for the accommodation of the speakers and their friends; and opinion, at least within the confines of the cathedral city, being so little divided, it was deemed unnecessary to take precautions against unseemly disturbances.

‘I think we ought to go and hear him,’ Ida said to Violet on the day previous to that fixed for the meeting. ‘If it isn’t instructive, it will very likely be amusing, and it will interest me to notice whether the audience find him out or not. Will you come with me?’

Violet expressed herself very willing to do so, but at the same time declared her inability to understand what there was to be found out by the audience or anybody else about Wilfrid. ‘What makes you hate him so?’ she asked.

‘Oh, I don’t hate him,’ replied the other; ‘one never does hate the people whom one has found out. Only, I *have* found him out; and so will you one of these fine days. Probably it won’t be his oratory that will enlighten you, though.’

As a matter of fact, his oratory was not of a description to enlighten even those whom it was designed to impress by its candour and straightforwardness. He spoke easily and fluently, but he confined himself almost

entirely to stock phrases, avoiding matters of controversy with a circumspection which was in one sense adroit, but which would hardly have served his purpose had he been called upon to deal with a more critical assemblage. His auditors, however, were very kind to him; he was loudly applauded when he declared that his politics might be summed up in the words 'Peace at home and abroad,' and added an assurance of his firm conviction that these blessings could only be guaranteed to the nation by a strong government; he was getting on quite nicely, and had elicited murmurs of approbation by some graceful allusions to the services rendered by his beloved and lamented father, when somebody called out, in a stentorian voice, from the far end of the hall: 'What about your beloved and lamented brother, eh? You done your best to bring *him* to the gallows, anyhow!'

At this there was a general stir and hum of voices, followed by cries of 'Turn him out!' But Wilfrid lost neither his temper nor his presence of mind.

‘I hope,’ said he calmly, as soon as he could obtain a hearing, ‘that nobody will be turned out. The object of this meeting, I take it, is to ascertain whether I am a fit and proper person to solicit your suffrages, and, were I guilty of the abominable conduct imputed to me, I most certainly should not be such a person. Therefore, however painful it may be to me to listen to an accusation of that kind, I will not dispute its relevancy, nor will I shrink from dealing with it.’

Of course it was easily dealt with. He was able to show that he had done all that an honest man could do towards supporting the hypothesis of his poor brother’s innocence ; he confessed, ‘with bitter regret,’ that he had scarcely believed himself in that hypothesis, and he did not deny that he had rejoiced at the escape of one who had been pronounced guilty by a jury. ‘It is unhappily true,’ said he, ‘that the cruelty of events has placed me in a pecuniary position which I should, most likely, never have occupied had the murderer been detected in time. That

thought will be a grief to me always; but I think I may confidently appeal to you all to say whether it is imaginable that one brother would deliberately endeavour to bring another to a shameful death in order that he might supplant him. Comparatively few of you in whose presence I now stand know me personally; time, I trust, will make us better acquainted, and to time I am contented to leave your judgment upon me. Nevertheless, you will perhaps permit me to tell you that I am not capable of fratricide, and, although I do not pretend to be more virtuous than my neighbours, I will venture to add that I have never consciously wronged any man.'

The above temperate and dignified sentences were welcomed by prolonged cheers, the effect of which was only partially marred when the previous interrupter shouted out:

'How about the women, then? Ain't you never wronged no woman, mister?'

Well, really that was exceeding all the limits of legitimate curiosity. After a short scuffle, the man was ejected and the proceed-

ings ended harmoniously. Probably, amongst all those who remained in the hall, the only one, except Wilfrid himself, who thought of ascribing any importance to the last insinuation levelled against the candidate, was Ida Chaine, who made a mental note of it.

But Wilfrid, before going home, took some pains to ascertain who the author of the disturbance had been, and when he learnt that this was a certain young fellow named Mould, the son of a market-gardener in the town, he looked grave. 'So you have been telling tales, have you, my good Jessie?' he mused. 'This won't do. You and your amiable relatives will have to be discreet; otherwise I shall be compelled, not only to disown you, but to cut off your allowance. You wouldn't like that, I suspect.'







## CHAPTER XXXVI

### MOULD AND SON

It was all very well for Wilfrid to say to himself that he had the whip hand of Jessie Viccars, inasmuch as he could at any moment deprive her of what, to the best of his belief, constituted her sole means of subsistence ; but there were practical difficulties in the way of communicating such a threat to her. He did not know her address, nor, if he had known it, would he have chosen to run the risk of writing her a letter ; as for the allowance, he had, with some ingenuity, contrived that it should be paid in to her account anonymously every quarter, and had taken every possible precaution against discovery of the source whence it emanated. Therefore, after thinking things over, he came to the conclusion that the boldest as well as the

wisest course would be to seek an interview with young Mould, who would probably be open to menace or cajolery. After all, £200 a year is £200 a year, and in that rank of life such a sum is usually held sufficient to cover a multitude of sins.

So, on the ensuing morning, a market-garden situated on the outskirts of the cathedral city was visited by a well-dressed gentleman who inquired whether Mr. Mould's son was anywhere about the place, and on hearing that he was, said he would be glad of a few words with him. A big-limbed, slouching youth, whose features bore some rough resemblance to those which had once attracted Wilfrid's fancy, presently appeared, and, without going through the ceremony of touching his straw hat, said gruffly :

‘Want to speak to me, sir?’

‘If you can spare me a minute or two,’ answered Wilfrid, with much affability. ‘It was you, I think, who did me the honour to interrupt me last night.’

‘Maybe ’t was. What then?’

‘Only, my good man, that you made a slanderous insinuation, and that it does not suit me at the present moment to let slanderous insinuations pass unnoticed. Of course what you said about my unfortunate brother was of little consequence and could do me little or no harm; but a suggestion that I have wronged some woman or women might possibly cost me a certain number of votes; and that is why I should strongly advise you to refrain from suggestions of that kind in future.’

‘Tain’t no slander,’ returned the young man doggedly. ‘My sister, as you knows precious well——’

‘Your sister?’ interrupted Wilfrid. ‘Oh yes; I remember her perfectly in old days. Didn’t she marry some London tradesman?’

‘Married a honest man and was took from him by a scoundrel—that’s her story, sir. And though she won’t mention no names, I’ve questioned her pretty ’ard, and I has my own notions—which she ain’t con-

tradicted of 'em, not as she would if they'd been false.'

'Dear me! And am I to understand that you accuse me of being that scoundrel? Really, my young friend, you are extremely flattering both to my morality and my good taste. Perhaps your sister is here, and perhaps, if she is, you will be good enough to produce her.'

'She ain't 'ere,' replied the other, much to Wilfrid's relief; 'she's up in London, livin' upon your money. That's about the truth, I reckon, and 't ain't you as can keep me from tellin' of it when I've a mind to. Ah, you're a nice beauty, you are! Why, I'd catch 'old of you and give you a jolly good 'iding for two pins!'

This vulgar and muscular youth looked very much as if he meant what he said, and there could be no doubt as to his ability to do what he threatened. Wilfrid, for his part, was a little puzzled. Indeed, it must be confessed that the threat of a thrashing is rather a puzzling sort of thing to deal

with, unless you are prepared to respond by promptly thrashing the threatener; and the wisdom of that experiment seemed, for obvious reasons, doubtful.

‘You appear to be under some misapprehension,’ he began; ‘I know nothing at all about your sister; I haven’t seen her for years, and——’

‘You’re a liar!’ broke in the irreconcilable young gardener, emphasising this uncivil rejoinder with sundry adjectives which it is needless to record.

Fortunately, he was a loud-voiced as well as a quarrelsome youth, and not less fortunately he had a father whose temper was mild, whose prudence was extreme, and who trotted out of one of the greenhouses in alarm at the sound of an altercation. To this gray-headed, feeble-looking person Wilfrid turned willingly enough.

‘Mr. Mould, I believe?’ said he blandly. ‘Your son here seems to stand rather in need of a little paternal correction.’

‘Now you just get back to your work,

Tom,' called out the old fellow, with a sternness which could hardly have been expected of him. 'D'ye think I keep you 'ere and give you your board and lodgin' for to insult customers? You mind your own business and leave me to mind mine—else I'll know the reason why, I promise you!'

The young giant turned sulkily upon his heel and tramped off, muttering to himself as he went. It may be assumed that he did not as yet see his way to an independent career.

'I ask your pardon, sir,' old Mr. Mould said, in deferential and respectful accents; 'I'm grieved to think as you should ha' been so spoke to; but that there boy of mine, he's too ready with his tongue—always was. As I tell him last night when he come 'ome and boasted o' what he'd done: "You've beyaved like a born fool, Tom," I says; "you ain't no call to speak up to Mr. Chainé like that, nor yet you won't do no good by it. If your sister got cause for complaint," I says, "she'll come forrard with it at the right time and

place. Don't you come puttin' of *your* oar in."

Wilfrid looked straight at his interlocutor and had at once the satisfaction of recognising in him a brother knave. 'Mr. Mould,' answered he very gently, 'you strike me as being a sensible man. I need not tell you that there is not a word of truth in the ridiculous charge which your son has trumped up against me; but even if there were, he would, as you say, have behaved like a born fool in committing himself to an assertion without any evidence to support it. Because I am sure you must perceive that your daughter's silence proves clearly that no such evidence exists, and supposing her, for the sake of argument, to have been betrayed, the worst that her betrayer could have to fear from her would be a statement which it would be open to him to meet with a blank denial. Then the general public would merely have to choose between his word and hers.'

'Well, sir,' observed Mr. Mould senior, scratching his ear, 'I don't know but what the

general public might take her word, if 't was to come to that. 'Tis well known, you see, as she left her 'usband, and she don't deny livin' under the protection of a gentleman as she won't put a name to—not yet. There's a many as might think her word as good as his.'

'Ah!—very likely,' returned Wilfrid. 'Well, it is no concern of mine, and I should not imagine that there was much fear of your daughter's confirming her brother's delusion——'

'Might be a bit orkard for you if she did, though, sir,' Mr. Mould interpolated submissively.

'No doubt it would. At certain times falsehood may be as injurious as truth, and that is why I took the trouble to come here to-day. But what I was going to say was that, assuming me to be really the culprit, and assuming that your daughter was in receipt of an allowance from me (which is, I believe, the customary arrangement in these distressing cases), I should naturally stop that



allowance the moment that she began to annoy me. You may depend upon it that the genuine culprit will do so, unless she continues to keep her own counsel: in self-defence, he could hardly help doing so. However, as I said before, the matter does not concern me, except in so far as that I should of course cease to employ you if you or any member of your family were to endanger my election by means of a false accusation. I believe we do at present employ you?’

Mr. Mould replied that such was the case, and expressed his humble gratitude for past favours. He went on to mention that he himself had always voted, and always should vote, for a Conservative candidate; but he abstained somewhat markedly from saying whether he believed or disbelieved in the accusation which Wilfrid had declared to be false.

Wilfrid scrutinised the man, thinking to himself, ‘Shall I, or shall I not? Upon the whole, I think not. He would only take the money and extort more black-mail, and then

very likely swear that he couldn't keep his son quiet. As it is, he sees the risk of playing a bold game, and he will repeat what I have said to Jessie, who will see it too.'

Therefore he spoke somewhat sternly to Mr. Mould, concluding his harangue by saying: 'Much as I sympathise with you in your domestic misfortunes, I cannot permit you to avenge them upon me; and it is as well to caution you that, if you don't exercise your parental authority, you may lay yourself open to an action for slander, with every prospect of having to pay a heavy penalty and costs.'

Mr. Mould made haste to asseverate that nothing could be further from his wishes or intentions than to annoy Mr. Chaine in any way. Perhaps he may have been frightened, or perhaps he may only have been cunning; but, whatever were his actual feelings and their motives, he managed to convey a tolerably distinct assurance that neither his son nor his daughter would be suffered to expose him to the perils of an action at law. Nevertheless, Wilfrid, before leaving the place,

purchased a hundred cinerarias and two hundred herbaceous calceolarias, which he did not want. These two rascals understood one another pretty well, and although the younger was very much worse than the elder, there was community of sentiment enough between them to enable them to shake hands in a metaphorical sense. They did not, of course, actually go through that form, but parted with a display of due humility on the one side and kindly urbanity on the other ; still Wilfrid, as he wended his way homewards, said to himself complacently : ‘ I shall not have much more trouble with Mould and Son, I fancy ; ’ while Mr. Mould, after booking the order for the flowers, took comfort from the reflection that a frequent renewal of such orders might be counted upon for the future. Jessie, moreover, would apparently be provided for so long as she continued to behave herself.

Being thus reassured and fortified, Wilfrid heard without much dismay that the Gladstonians had got hold of a candidate for the vacant seat. Indeed he was no very

formidable opponent, this young Lord John Twistleton, of whom little was known save that he was the third son of a marquis, that he was anxious to obtain a seat in Parliament, that he was not connected with the county, and that he was by no means well off. Upon the face of it, it did not seem likely that he would require a great deal of beating. Nor, when Lord John appeared upon the scene and attempted to deliver a speech, were his utterances of a nature to impress wavering electors. Much more impressive was Wilfrid's kindly, if slightly contemptuous, welcome of his rival, whose acquaintance he had already made in London, and with whom he publicly declared that he had no quarrel. Of course he exposed the delusions and fallacies of which Lord John was the victim; but he was careful, in so doing, to explain that he did not for a moment question his adversary's honesty, and this assurance was very generally felt to be magnanimous, as well as creditable to the speaker.

‘You can afford to show some generosity

to that poor, empty-headed young man,' Violet remarked, 'because you have nothing whatever to fear from him.'

He had, however, something to fear from Violet herself, who, though as humble as could be wished in her criticisms upon politicians, was so sharp and experienced a judge of horsemanship that she never forgave timidity in the hunting-field. It was a sad and quite uncalled-for mistake on Wilfrid's part to attend a meet of the Southshire hounds with a view to acquiring her admiration and esteem. He might plausibly have pleaded his engagements as an excuse for remaining at home; but he chose to follow the fox one fine day, and, by ill luck, he did not follow the fox straight enough to satisfy Miss Stanton. Now, of course it is not every man who would venture to ride at so big a thing as the Wandle is apt to be after the autumn rains; Violet herself did not venture to put Bob at it, knowing that the little horse could not possibly clear such a width of water. But she saw Mr. Wilfrid Chainé's

three-hundred-guinea hunter refuse, she saw a second half-hearted effort on Mr. Wilfrid Chaine's part, and she at once formed conclusions respecting him which nothing in the world would ever have induced her to recede from.

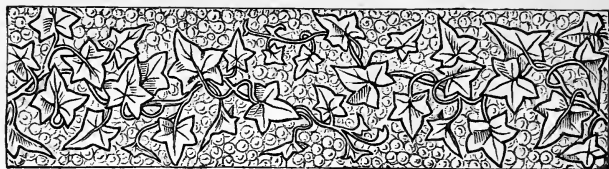
Riding homewards towards evening she was overtaken by Hubert, to whom she said abruptly and candidly: 'I don't think much of your brother: he ought to have been ashamed to accept the mask.'

'Well, he earned it, you know,' answered Hubert, who had himself jumped into the middle of the stream and been half drowned; 'he was the first man in at the death.'

'Oh, he was the first man in because he got over a bridge, and because he was about ten times better mounted than the rest of us. I don't object to a man who goes round, and I don't object to a man who admits that he would rather not risk a ducking; but I do object to funks—especially swaggering funks. Your brother could have got over easily enough if he had had the heart for it; but he

made his horse refuse twice. He's no sportsman, and, if I were he, I should stick to making political speeches.'

She might have added that she would thenceforward regard both his political and social behaviour with distrust; nor, perhaps, was her instinct an unsound one. Character betrays itself in various ways; sometimes it never betrays itself at all; but there must always be great danger in exhibiting what Violet had described, appropriately enough, as swaggering cowardice in the presence of experts. Wilfrid had lowered himself far more fatally in her estimation by his conduct that day than he would have supposed possible, or than Ida could have done by any number of depreciatory remarks. As for Hubert, that straightforward and innocent young man opined that it was a matter of comparatively small importance whether Violet thought well or ill of his elder brother, whose cause it seemed scarcely worth while to espouse. He had, in fact, subjects of much deeper interest to discourse upon.



## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A TRIUMPH AND A SHOCK

ONE reason why limping Nemesis rarely fails to overtake the wicked is that the wicked, in common with the righteous, know remarkably little about themselves. All of us—or, at any rate, most of us—are conscious of our individual imperfections ; but we always hope that these are not evident to the rest of the world, and thus we are apt to show ourselves in our true colours by some trivial word or act which we might fairly have expected to escape notice. Wilfrid Chaine was quite pleased with the trophy which his day's hunting had secured for him ; he was pleased with it not so much for its own sake as because he felt sure that it would earn him Violet Stanton's respect, and it did not for one moment occur to his mind that she could



have been scandalised by the refusal of his horse to take a brook which, after all, nobody else in the field had cleared. Still less could he imagine that so ordinary an incident had caused her to set him down as a very contemptible fellow. Had he been able at the time to surmise the existence of such inconsequence in her ideas, he might not improbably have hardened his heart and accomplished a feat well within his powers; for he desired nothing more ardently now than to win the admiration of the girl who had, somehow or other, managed to inspire him with the strongest passion that he had ever experienced.

Happily for his peace of mind, he did not come across her for some little time after the episode mentioned in the last chapter. He was, indeed, too busy to call upon Mrs. Stanton, every hour of his days being occupied with preparations for the approaching contest, which promised to be a somewhat closer one than had at first been anticipated. Lord John Twistleton was not, to be sure, possessed of any qualities adapted to arouse

enthusiasm or excite alarm ; but he had been pretty well coached, he was pretty well supported, and, being a friendly, unaffected sort of creature, he had made himself liked by the townsfolk, as well as by the farmers and the silent, impassive labourers. Moreover, there was no doubt that young Mould's unseemly interruptions (which, of course, were duly reported in the account of the meeting published by the local Radical paper) had been to some extent prejudicial to the Conservative candidate.

‘That kind of thing is always a little awkward, you see,’ one of Wilfrid’s most active adherents told him. ‘It may be utter bosh ; but, do what one will, there are sure to be people who will shake their heads and declare that smoke doesn’t rise without a fire. I tell you frankly that I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if that beggar had lost you a hundred votes.’

Well, the loss of a hundred or even two hundred votes was not very likely to mean the loss of the election ; still upon more than

one occasion it was made rather disagreeably evident to Wilfrid that certain persons regarded him with suspicion, and of course he could not tell what indiscretions young Mould might not be perpetrating in private life. However, no further public attack was made upon him, nor did any news, direct or indirect, of Jessie Viccars reach his ears. Upon the whole, the outlook struck him as being in all respects favourable.

Probably he was less quick-sighted than lovers ordinarily are, having more subjects to think about than lovers ordinarily have; for he noticed no difference in Violet's manner when at length they were brought face to face again. He was driving past the White House one evening, on his way back from a distant meeting, when he descried Miss Stanton in the act of turning in at the gate, and, handing the reins to his groom, he at once jumped out of the dog-cart which he had been driving and hastened to join her.

‘What an eternity it is since I have seen you!’ he exclaimed.

‘Not quite so long as that, is it?’ returned the girl with a laugh.

As a matter of fact, however, the interval had been long enough to enable her to overcome her first feeling of disgust for him, and it was only with a slight touch of perfectly good-humoured contempt in her voice that she added: ‘I don’t think I have met you since that run in which you distinguished yourself so greatly that they had to give you the mask.’

‘Well, there was nobody else to claim it,’ answered Wilfrid. ‘I only wish you had secured the brush; I don’t know who the lady was who managed to get up before you; but I am sure she didn’t ride half as well as you did.’

‘Perhaps she was better mounted,’ observed Violet. ‘It isn’t always the best riders who get masks and brushes, you know, and there is a sort of prejudice among regular hunting people against taking such things unless they have been earned by straight going.’

He still remained happily unconscious of

her meaning. 'It seemed to me that you went as straight as anybody,' he declared: 'of course, as you say, nobody can do more than his or her horse can do.'

Then they entered the house together, and one of them received an embrace, while the other was fain to make the best of a very frigid greeting, from its mistress. Ida, as has already been mentioned, was under no apprehension lest Hubert's interests should suffer through the rivalry of his brother; so that she did not care how often Wilfrid might be brought into Violet's company: in fact, she was, if anything, rather disposed to encourage an intimacy between them, believing that this would result in a speedy declaration on his part, and that he would thus be the sooner got rid of. She could not, however, persuade herself to welcome him, and as he realised in the course of a few minutes that there was little or no chance of his securing Violet's ear again that evening, he presently retired, excusing himself upon the plea that his horse was standing out in the cold.

‘I am afraid I was rude to him,’ observed Ida, not very penitently, after he had been heard to drive away.

‘You were rather,’ answered Violet; ‘but that won’t have surprised him. It isn’t quite the first time, is it?’

‘Oh, as I told you, I have found him out, and he knows that I have found him out: under the circumstances, it would be hardly worth while to make a pretence of cordiality. You, of course, haven’t found him out yet; but you will eventually.’

‘Well, I rather think that I have already,’ Violet replied. ‘At least, I have found out that he isn’t worth a brass farthing.’ And she proceeded to give an account of the episode in the hunting-field, which had brought that unalterable conviction home to her.

Ida could not help laughing at so characteristic and so slender a reason for pronouncing a fellow-creature worthless. ‘You are like the ill-informed sceptics whom M. Renan complains of,’ she remarked; ‘you are right, but

you have really no business to be right. A man isn't necessarily a villain because he can't ride.'

'I never said he was; only if he rides in a certain way, I know what to think of him, that's all. When you come to consider of it, it's much the same thing as telling a lie—which everybody admits to be rather a bad sign of a man.'

'Is it the same thing?' asked Ida. 'I shouldn't have thought so; still I have no doubt that Wilfrid would tell a lie unhesitatingly if it answered his purpose. In fact, he has probably told a great many during his canvass. He is sure to be returned, I hear; though I almost wish he might be defeated. He would be, if he had his deserts.'

Like the majority of her sex, Ida was incapable of subordinating private to public interests, and when her sex has been converted into a majority of the electorate of this country, those who live to see the emancipation of woman carried out will probably witness some whimsical results. Meanwhile, the

present free and enlightened voters, recognising that government by party forms an essential element in our glorious constitution, are seldom likely to commit the folly of choosing a member for his merits or rejecting him on account of his demerits ; so that, notwithstanding the amiability of Lord John Twistleton and certain sinister rumours which had been circulated about Wilfrid Chaine, most of the St. Albyn's electors had fully made up their minds to support the latter. Still success was not a matter of such absolute certainty that Wilfrid could afford to be idle, and he felt that he must postpone all serious siege operations upon the heart of Miss Stanton until he should be once more his own master.

Violet, therefore, did not see him again until the polling day ; but walking down the High Street that morning to see the free and enlightened ones conducted to their destination in the carriages of the neighbouring magnates, she was accosted, not a little to her surprise, by Sir Harvey Amherst,



who appeared to be in capital health and spirits, and who was, as usual, very nicely dressed.

‘I came down to attend our friend Chaine’s meeting last night,’ the evergreen baronet explained. ‘Of course I didn’t say much—nobody ever expects me to say much—but I sat upon the platform and grinned. I was told that it would have a good effect if I did, and one was very glad to do what one could for his father’s son, you know.’

‘It was extremely kind of you to take so much trouble,’ remarked Violet, wondering whether her former suitor would have been equally accommodating if he had been acquainted with all Wilfrid’s designs, and wondering a little, also, whether the reason that he had given was really his sole one for revisiting St. Albyn’s.

Sir Harvey relieved her mind of doubt upon the latter point by continuing, with something of a simper: ‘I was rather in hopes that I might come across you; I have a piece of news for you upon which I am sure you will

congratulate me. I am—er—going to be married.'

He tried hard to look and speak modestly about it; he said his good fortune was greater than he was in any way entitled to expect; he admitted that he was getting on in life, whereas his fiancée was not yet twenty; but when Violet started with astonishment on hearing him name a young lady of high rank and very considerable beauty, who had been pointed out to her during the past London season, he could not help triumphing a little.

'I am not sure that it is such a very great disadvantage for a girl to marry a man older than herself,' he observed. 'After all, it isn't everybody who thinks so, and I am glad to say that *she* doesn't.'

A passing vision of eighteen loose-boxes floated before Violet's eyes; but she looked at Sir Harvey, and she thought of Hubert, and her congratulations were as hearty as they were unaffected. Not a word in allusion to the past was spoken either by her or by her companion, nor did the latter ask her any

questions as to her intimacy with the Chainé family. Perhaps he did not know of the existence of that intimacy ; perhaps, if he did know, he did not care. Apparently he had wished to point out to her that other people were less fastidious than she was, and apparently he now felt a little ashamed of having thus crowed and flapped his wings ; for he was profuse in friendly assurances and in expressions of hope that she and her mother would honour him with a visit as soon as there should be a Lady Amherst to receive them. Violet made the ambiguous reply which he probably expected, and he took leave of her with much cordiality, saying that he had promised to lunch with Chainé at the White Hart.

Wilfrid, of course, had been informed of Sir Harvey Amherst's approaching nuptials, and had received the news with satisfaction. Sir Harvey, to be sure, was no longer his rival ; but his opinion of women in general was so poor a one that he thought Violet might not improbably be influenced in his

favour on learning that a man who was in many respects his inferior had, without any difficulty, secured a bride who—at least in the eyes of the world at large—might be accounted rather more eligible than she. Wilfrid, indeed, was in high good humour that day, for everything was going well with him. The polling had proceeded rapidly and, as far as could be ascertained, satisfactorily; the result, it was believed, would be declared before ten o'clock, and it was regarded so much in the light of a foregone conclusion that several of his friends talked of going home to dinner.

A few actually did so; but the greater part remained with him to partake of such fare as the landlord of the White Hart could set before them; and hardly had they lighted their cigars, after making the best of this, than they were summoned off to the Town Hall to hear the announcement of the poll.

Loud and prolonged cheers from the crowd outside greeted the figures: Chaine, 2425; Twistleton, 2152: a substantial victory, if hardly so overwhelming a one as had been

anticipated by the more sanguine. Wilfrid signified his sense of the honour done to him in a neat little speech, not forgetting to pay a few graceful compliments to his vanquished opponent; then there was a good deal of hand-shaking to be gone through; after which the new legislator was free to say good-night to everybody and enter the carriage which was waiting for him.

He was in the act of doing so when a tall man, the collar of whose heavy overcoat was turned up so as to conceal his face, pushed through the crowd and touched him on the elbow, saying: 'You might as well take me with you, if you're going home.'

'And who are you, pray?' asked Wilfrid, looking round for a policeman.

'Only your brother,' answered the tall man in a whisper. 'Don't let us have a scene here; I'll tell you all about it in the carriage.'

Wilfrid was too thunderstruck to utter a syllable until he and this very unexpected companion were being driven at a smart trot through the dimly-lighted streets, when he

gasped out: 'Good God, John! what—what is the meaning of this?'

It was not a very warm welcome to extend to one who had apparently returned from the grave; but in truth he hardly knew what he was saying, and felt as though he had been detected in the commission of a crime. John, however, did not seem to resent his brother's lack of natural affection.

'I'm sorry I startled you,' he said apologetically; 'I suppose I oughtn't to have done it; but I heard what was going on as soon as I arrived at the station about an hour ago; so I thought I would walk up to the Town Hall, and when I saw you come out I couldn't control my patience any longer.'

'But—but, my dear fellow,' exclaimed Wilfrid, beginning to recover himself a little, 'we all thought you were dead! In fact, we had positive information that you were.'

'Oh yes; I took care that the information should be as positive as possible. You see, I thought at the time that it would be a relief to you all to hear of my death, besides making

things rather safer for me, and it wasn't a difficult job to manage, though it cost me rather more money than I could afford. Poor Wharton didn't half like sending those 450 dollars home, and of course I had to pay him handsomely for doing it, as well as for running the risk of getting into trouble. However, the risk didn't amount to much ; because he had arranged to leave for California within a few weeks, and there really was an Englishman of the name of Brown who was killed by an accident in the way that we described, and whose grave you would have found at Jamestown if any of you had had the curiosity to go and look for it. As for me, I need hardly tell you that I looked upon myself as dead, so far as home and England were concerned, and you would certainly never have heard of me again if I hadn't chanced upon an account of that gamekeeper's confession in a newspaper one day. I had heard of the poor old governor's death before. Ah well ! he served me a dirty turn, that fellow Barton ; but I can forgive him. I believed myself to be a murderer for

such a long time that I know how a murderer feels, and I know it takes a lot of pluck to face the gallows. Anyhow, it's all over and all right now, thank God! The only thing I'm sorry for is that the governor didn't live to hear that I was innocent.'

While the above condensed narrative was being unfolded, Wilfrid had been gradually regaining possession of his senses. His brother, it seemed, bore no grudge against him, which was fortunate, and his brother's return could entail no pecuniary loss upon him, which was more fortunate still. It was, therefore, with every appearance of sincere regret that he said: 'I wish to goodness I hadn't recommended you to bolt, old chap! It has weighed upon my mind ever since Barton's revelation; but naturally I thought at the time that you had killed Fraser, and I fully expected that the coroner's jury would think as I did. I was in hopes that you would read the doctor's evidence, which showed quite clearly that the man had died by strangulation, and that if you had never laid hands



upon his throat, you would come back and say so.'

John explained that he had seen no report of the proceedings at the inquest. He had blindly and stupidly obeyed instructions; he had hidden himself for a day or two in the wilderness of London, and had then crossed over to Antwerp, whence he had taken ship for New York. 'Besides,' he added, 'I don't know that I should have had the courage to show up in any case. Things looked uncommonly black against me, and it isn't over and above likely that my story would have been believed if I had come back to tell it. I've parted with my birthright, it's true; but you're not to blame for that, and perhaps it's just as well that you should be the squire instead of me. I shouldn't have been a great success as a squire, and I certainly shouldn't have succeeded as an M.P. Moreover, I'm sure you won't let me starve.'

Under cover of the darkness Wilfrid indulged in a grimace; but he responded promptly and heartily: 'My dear fellow,

you may make your mind quite easy on that score. Not that you are in any danger of starving; because, as perhaps you may have heard, the governor left your wife the White House until her death or re-marriage, as well as £40,000 in hard cash. By the way, have you written or telegraphed to her?’

‘Not yet,’ answered John, with a perceptible tremor in his voice; ‘the fact is that I started off for England the moment that I saw that paragraph in the newspaper; and I didn’t know—I wasn’t sure—look here, Wilfrid; tell me honestly: do you think she will be glad to see me?’

Once more the obscurity was of service to Wilfrid in concealing his irrepressible smile. ‘Let us hope so,’ he replied; ‘still it is rather late to give her a shock of any kind to-night. Hadn’t you better stop with me and go down and see her to-morrow?’

‘Well, that was what I rather thought of suggesting,’ answered the other. ‘I left my traps at the station, and I dare say you could

send somebody for them. Or perhaps you could lend me the few things that I shall want for the night.'

Wilfrid declared his willingness to do so. For choice, he would undoubtedly have preferred his brother's death to his resurrection; yet, since the man must needs come to life again, it was a great comfort that he should have come to life in so reasonable a frame of mind. When the two had reached Chainé Court, and, after running the gauntlet of the old servants, whose emotion and excitement were naturally extreme, had seated themselves opposite to one another in the room which had formerly been old Mr. Chainé's study, he was a good deal struck by the softening change which exile and affliction had produced upon John. There were plenty of grey hairs now on the poor fellow's red head and in his beard, which he had allowed to grow untrimmed; there were deep lines all over his face; his voice, too, was lower in tone and less assured than of yore. And—oddly enough, as it seemed to Wilfrid—he made no further

allusion to the fact that he had been disinherited : that he evidently considered to be a question of secondary importance.

What he not less evidently considered to be a question of primary importance was that of how his wife would receive him upon the morrow ; and Wilfrid contrived, while answering the many queries put to him upon the subject, to repress the chuckles by which his sense of humour caused him to be inwardly shaken.

‘This is rather a bore for me,’ he reflected ; ‘but it’s a considerably greater bore for Mrs. Ida. Well, my dear madam, it serves you right, and your brother-in-law doesn’t pity you.’





## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### POOR IDA

THE news of her brother-in-law's victory reached Ida at breakfast time on the day following that on which the result of the election had been made known, and she was not very sorry to hear that his opponent had run him hard. She would not have been very sorry if his opponent had beaten him outright; still, from a political point of view, it was doubtless well that the Conservative candidate had been returned, while, from a private and personal point of view, it did not greatly signify. In these days Members of Parliament must expect to spend at least half of their lives in London—which is sometimes a comfort to their friends and neighbours in the country. Ida, moreover, was not disposed that morning to grudge anybody the gratification of a

legitimate ambition ; for the post had brought her a long letter from Arthur Mayne, every word of which was sweet to her, and over the perusal of which she lingered for some little time after the servants would have been glad to get her out of the dining-room. Arthur wrote in high jubilation. He was full of work, full of hope and as full of gratitude to Providence as it is, perhaps, only natural and right to be in times of prosperity. Those who believe that Providence intervenes in mundane affairs should, however, always be prepared for rude and apparently purposeless shocks ; and that is just what nobody ever is prepared for. Ida, at all events, when she was informed that Mr. Chaine was in the drawing-room and wished to speak to her, had not the faintest foreboding of what that announcement portended. She lost no time in joining Wilfrid, whom she found standing by the window, with his hands behind his back, and to whom she offered some half-ironical congratulations.

‘ I have heard your news already,’ she said.  
‘ I hope you are satisfied, and I suppose you

ought to be; though the figures seem to show that there are still a considerable number of Radicals left in the division.'

'Quite satisfied, thank you,' answered Wilfrid; 'a man who can't be satisfied with having converted a minority of over five hundred into a majority of nearly three hundred must be hard to please. My friends are kind enough to say that I have done good service to the cause, and I am sure I may venture to reckon you among my friends.'

'Oh, of course. Your conduct to me and mine has always been so friendly; and your coming here with such promptitude to tell me of your success is only one more unneeded proof of it.'

Wilfrid responded by a little bow and a little smile. 'I have certainly always wished to be friendly to you and yours,' he answered. 'I cannot flatter myself that there would be anything friendly in my coming here to tell you that I have won the election, and, as a matter of fact, that is not my errand. I have much more welcome intelligence to impart to you—

so welcome, indeed, that I scarcely venture to blurt it out without preparing your mind for it. Great joys and great griefs are like cold shower-baths ; it isn't everybody whose heart is sound enough to resist the shock of them.'

'My heart is perfectly sound, I believe,' said Ida, feeling sure that he had some disagreeable news to give, but having no inkling of its nature.

'And perfectly true, I have no doubt. If there is one thing of which I am more thoroughly convinced than another, it is that you have never for a moment wavered in your allegiance to our poor, dear John. Your acrimony against me (which, I assure you, I did not in the least resent) when you fancied that I had urged him to leave the country after his unhappy onslaught upon Leonard Fraser, was a very distinct proof of that. I well understood and sympathised with your indignation, misplaced though it was. You felt that he had been exculpated too late, that there was very little practical use in establishing his innocence while he was mouldering in his grave,



and you would have given—well, I dare say you would have given ten years of your own life to resuscitate him and take your place by his side once more as the honourable wife of an honourable and sadly calumniated man. Now, suppose — of course I am only putting a hypothetical case—but just try to suppose that the circumstantial account which we received of my poor brother's death out in America was a fiction from beginning to end ; suppose that he was alive and well, and that he was at this very moment waiting impatiently outside your gate, yet afraid to enter, lest the sudden, overwhelming happiness of beholding him again in the flesh should be too much for you : can you manage to suppose that ?'

She could indeed ; and the bare supposition sufficed to withdraw every particle of blood from her cheeks. She half rose from her chair and then fell back ; the four walls seemed to be closing in upon her and the light of the sunny winter morning turning to darkness, though she was keenly aware of Wilfrid's smiling, malicious exultation and of the para-

mount importance of keeping up appearances. 'Is this true?' she asked hoarsely, and could not force any further words through her dry lips.

'Yes, my dear Ida, it is quite true,' Wilfrid replied, with a gentle and affectionate intonation. 'I am afraid I have broken the glad tidings rather clumsily; but it is almost impossible to perform such a task by degrees. Your dear husband did not dare to announce himself without any warning; he insisted upon it that I should see you first and endeavour to prepare you for what must appear to you like a miracle, and, as you may well imagine, I could refuse him nothing. I must leave him to tell you his own story; I won't intrude any longer upon either of you; I will only beg you to believe that this most astonishing event rejoices my heart scarcely less than it does yours. Now I'll go and tell John that he may come in.'

Against her will, Ida laid a detaining hand upon his coat-sleeve. 'Stop—stop!' she gasped; 'I am not ready—I can't see him yet!

You have told me nothing ; I don't understand —how is it possible that he can be still alive ?'

Wilfrid was not tender-hearted and he owed his sister-in-law a grudge ; yet the agony expressed in her face was so intense that even he was to some extent moved to compassion by it. 'Nothing in this world matters so much as all that,' he said, laying down half-involuntarily the first principle of his system of philosophy. 'One is glad, one is sorry, one is angry or ashamed or jealous, or whatever it may be—these are merely emotions which last for a few hours or days and then pass away and are forgotten. The main thing is not to shorten our lives by giving them too free a rein. You thought you were a widow and you find you are a wife : well, that is good luck or bad luck, as the case may be ; but, either way, it isn't as good as coming into a fortune of a million sterling or as bad as breaking your leg. Let us try to steer clear of exaggeration.'

Then, perceiving that she was physically incapable of making any rejoinder, and also that he had avenged himself upon her as

completely as he could wish, he favoured her with a condensed report of John's narrative : after which he declared that in all conscience he could not keep the poor fellow waiting outside any longer, and so decamped.

An interval of about five minutes elapsed, during which Ida listened stupidly to the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece and the creaking of the boughs outside, as a brisk wind swept through them from the north. She felt stunned and paralysed ; she could not regain the use of her faculties ; she could only realise that a most terrible and tragic thing had happened, and that she must not, if by any means she could help it, betray her misery. But how could she help it ?—what could she do ? It was not even possible to rush upstairs and lock herself into her bedroom, though she was dimly aware that in some such desperate measure lay her sole chance of concealing the melancholy truth that her husband's return to life was the heaviest affliction which could have fallen upon her.

At length the door was slowly and timidly

opened; John stepped in, closing it behind him, and stood gazing at her in a queer, wistful way, but advanced no farther. The sight of him gave her a shock of a totally different kind from that which she had anticipated. Was this really John? This weather-beaten, stooping, weary-looking man, whose face was so drawn and wrinkled and whose hair was so fast turning grey! What must he not have suffered to have aged by twenty years in that brief space of time! His voice, too, when he began to speak, seemed to have strangely altered—to have become low and uncertain, like the voice of an old man. She scarcely heard what he said—something feebly and pathetically jocular about his having come back like a bad shilling—but, while she gazed at him, all of a sudden there came over her a great wave of pity, sweeping away for the moment every other emotion, and she moved swiftly towards him, with hands outstretched, exclaiming, ‘Oh, *poor* fellow!’

Well was it for both of them that his woe-begone aspect had chanced to touch her heart;

for she was no hypocrite, and had he presented himself in any other guise he must have perceived that he had made a deplorable mistake by emerging from the solitudes of Western America. As it was, he was too deeply moved by her kindness to ask himself whether there was anything akin to love in that manifestation or to remember the blank stare with which she had greeted his entrance. It was a very broken and incoherent account that he had to give of himself and his adventures, and only by degrees was she able to arrive at any comprehension of the state of mind in which he had quitted his native land and left everybody to believe that he must have been guilty of a crime which he could not really have committed. But the more he said about it the more she became convinced that Wilfrid, and Wilfrid alone, had been responsible for that fatal error.

‘The wretch!’ she ejaculated indignantly; ‘it was he who deserved hanging, not you. Nothing will ever persuade me that he didn’t know the truth all along and that he didn’t

deliberately misrepresent what happened, so as to get you out of the way and rob you of your inheritance. And the worst of it is that he has been completely successful !’

John shook his head and smiled. ‘No, my dear,’ said he, ‘Wilfrid didn’t know. How could he, when I didn’t know myself?’

‘Ah, but you were——’

‘I was drunk, whereas he was sober. Yes; that is so; but he couldn’t have seen much more than that there was a scrimmage, and when he found the man lying dead, how could he guess that somebody else had killed him? That was a most unlikely thing to have occurred, and that is just what has made me believe all this time that I must have been a murderer. Of course I didn’t hear that poor Fraser had been choked to death; but even if I had heard, I couldn’t have felt absolutely certain that I didn’t throttle him. Ah, if you knew what a weight has been lifted off my mind, you wouldn’t think that the loss of the estate was much of a misfortune in comparison! When all’s said and done, it is better that Wilfrid

should be squire than that I should ; my father always felt that, and so did my mother. I'm quite contented that things should be as they are—that is, if *you* are contented.'

She did her best to answer him as he wished to be answered. She was so very sorry for him, and so impressed by his quiet, unselfish resignation, that it was less hard to her than she could have supposed possible to say what a fond wife might have been expected to say at such a time. Yet there remained a great deal which could not be said—which she could never dare to say. She became painfully conscious of that when her husband began to speak of Leonard Fraser and to crave her pardon for the base suspicions that he had allowed himself to entertain about her and the violinist in days gone by. Poor John was very humble, very gentle and very remorseful ; but it did not seem to have occurred to him that he had done his wife an infinitely greater wrong by giving her to understand that he was dead than by anything else that he had done or left undone. He asked to be forgiven



the causeless fits of jealousy which she had almost forgotten ; he did not apologise for the more heinous offence of being still alive, nor, apparently, did he remember that human and divine law permits widows to form fresh ties. Whether she was right or wrong in deciding that she would keep him in ignorance of a catastrophe for the occurrence of which he was mainly responsible is a question for skilled and experienced moralists ; it only comes within the province of the present chronicler to mention that she did so decide, and to express a deferential doubt whether one out of any ten ladies who may deign to read these words would have decided otherwise.

Later in the day, Hubert having galloped over from St. Albyn's to give his lost and found brother an uproarious welcome, she was able to escape to her own room and compose a letter which it was not less difficult than necessary to write. After many attempts, and after shedding many tears, she managed to get it written, because what must be done always is done ; but the process was a cruel one, and,

to tell the truth, it deprived her of all tenderness of feeling for her husband. Although she was very sorry for him, she was, and could not help being, much more sorry for herself. He had suffered, no doubt ; but his sufferings were over (and had, besides, been brought upon him entirely by his own insane conduct), whereas hers could only end with her life. She would, of course, do her duty ; only it could never be in her power to grow reconciled to that duty or to find any shadow of happiness in the performance of it. 'We must never meet again,' she wrote to Arthur. 'I am sure you will understand that, and that, if you come down to St. Albyn's, as I suppose you must from time to time, you will try to spare me a trial which I could not bear.'

There are some trials which have to be borne, whether we will or no ; and, as may be imagined, Ida was called upon to face a tolerably large number of these during the next few days. She had to face her father's pious ejaculations of thankfulness to high Heaven ; she had to make the best of Hubert's

untimely jubilation ; she had to put up with Wilfrid's sardonic congratulations and Violet Stanton's silent but evident compassion ; worst of all, she had to respond as best she could to the caresses of her legitimate lord and master. The latter, to be sure, were not unduly or importunately thrust upon her. John was so humble, so diffident, so apprehensive lest his re-appearance should have entailed an unwelcome loss of liberty upon her, that she could not choose but endeavour to reassure him, and the gratitude with which he received such advances as she had it within her capacity to make, caused her many a remorseful pang. Yet through it all she was unable to help despising the man. Why had he run away like a coward ? Why, now that he knew the whole truth, did he persist in declaring that no blame could be imputed to the man to whose perfidious counsels he had listened, and who had profited by his folly ? There was—or, at all events, so she thought—something that was by no means worthy of respect in such a seemingly benevolent and innocent view of

the situation. She could not, moreover, feel quite pleased with John's perfect willingness to live upon the money bequeathed to her by his father, or with his tame acquiescence in a state of things so manifestly unjust as the substitution of his younger brother for himself.

'I don't think we can call it exactly an injustice,' John said mildly, in answer to some strongly-worded remarks of hers. 'There was no entail, you see; and even if all this hadn't happened, my father would have had a right to make Wilfrid his heir. Besides, what does it signify, since we are quite comfortably off? I shall soon shake down and make occupations for myself; I won't hang about the house more than I can help.'

She sincerely hoped that he would be as good as his word; for what had she in common with so poor-spirited a creature? And what subjects of conversation was she likely to discover when he was seated by her side? She would almost have preferred some symptoms of his old gusty, uncertain temper to this

misplaced meekness. In truth she did not realise that the poor fellow's heart was broken, that all the pugnacity had been expelled from his nature by the terrible ordeal through which he had passed, and that he now only asked to be permitted to spend the remaining years of his life in peace. She herself was otherwise constituted. Had she been a man, and had she been a soldier, she would probably have died fighting; resignation appeared to her to be the meanest of all the virtues, although there are doubtless circumstances under which no man or woman can do anything else than strive to be resigned.

Now, it was as clear as daylight that such circumstances existed in the case of Arthur Mayne, who wrote briefly and sadly to say that he would obey her injunctions in every particular. 'I can't trust myself to set down what I feel,' was the last sentence in a half-filled sheet of paper; 'I dare say you will understand without that how wretched I am and how bitterly I reproach myself. I have been a curse in your life, little as I ever

dreamt of being so, and the best thing—the only thing—that you can do is to forget me.'

This was admirable; but it failed to give satisfaction to Ida, who could have pardoned him for being more rebellious.

'Forget him!' she ejaculated, as she tore up his letter and threw the fragments into the fire (for she did not wish to read it again); 'that is easily said. I suppose it would be easily done, too, if one were good and reasonable and heartless. Well, whether I remember, or whether I forget, there can't be much doubt as to which course *he* will pursue. Oh, what a vile world this is, and on what an unlucky day I was born into it!'

John dined alone that evening; his wife had a headache and was unable to leave her room. But on the following morning his anxious inquiries were rewarded by the information that she was in perfect health and spirits.

'I am as strong as a horse, and I should be inexcusable if I were not happy, shouldn't I?' she said, with a rather hard laugh.



## CHAPTER XXXIX

### WILFRID ATTENDS A TEA-PARTY

It is a simple achievement and one of almost, if not quite, daily occurrence to deceive one's self and others ; yet there are a few points as regards which deception may be said to be virtually impossible, and Ida made a dead failure of her conscientious efforts to persuade her husband that their reunion was a source of joy to her. She knew it, though he uttered no word of complaint, and though he was evidently trying as hard as she was to make believe. And if she was provoked by his submissive gentleness, if she said to herself that he was assuming the air of a martyr without any ostensible justification for so doing, some little allowance may well be made for one so sorely tried. She did what she could ; she endeavoured to talk to him ; she

endeavoured to be interested in the interest which he professed to take in the garden, and to forgive him for reminding her with such exasperating frequency that the garden was hers, not his. More than that she really could not do. She could not love him; she could not respect him; she could not for the life of her comprehend his readiness to accept those crumbs of affection which duty compelled her to throw to him, nor could she explain his condonation of Wilfrid's conduct on any other hypothesis save that of sheer cowardice.

The newspapers, of course, had a good deal to say about the resurrection of the supposed criminal, and some of the comments thereupon which appeared in print were of a nature to make an innocent man's blood boil; but they did not seem to produce that effect upon John, who only shrugged his shoulders and said that the thing was bound to be a nine days' wonder.

'Some people,' he observed, 'will always believe that I was the actual murderer, and



that my relations bribed Barton to make a false confession on his deathbed. We need not trouble ourselves with their beliefs, though. After all, why should I care what anybody, except you, thinks ?'

Ida was of opinion that he ought to care ; but then, as has been said before, she did not understand that the man's heart was broken. She herself was infuriated, not so much by the public as by the private criticisms which were reported to her from time to time, and which, it must be owned, did not err on the side of charity. St. Albyn's, it appeared, while rejoicing in the removal of a disgraceful stigma from the annals of an ancient family, was a little bit too clever and too experienced to give implicit credence to the truth.

'We must accept, and I am sure we are all only too glad to accept, a version of the affair which cannot be disproved,' Mrs. Pickersgill declared ; 'still one does feel that it would have been more satisfactory if some explanation of the unfortunate man's flight from justice had been vouchsafed to us. As it is,

we are given to understand that he imagined himself guilty, until somebody else chose to proclaim that he had done the deed—which, to say the least of it, must have been a bold flight of imagination.'

'It is admitted that he was—er—intoxicated at the time,' good-natured little Canon Pickersgill ventured to remark; 'a man in that condition may fancy all sorts of things, you know.'

'That is just what I say. The excuse is rather a poor and rather a discreditable one; yet, such as it is, we are bound to accept it, and I would not for the world do anything to make his poor wife's position harder for her than it already is. She may not have known, and I hope she did not know, that he was still living when she so openly encouraged young Mayne's advances. At all events, I certainly think that we ought to allow her the benefit of the doubt, and I quite mean to ask her and her husband to tea very soon.'

It is no great honour to be asked to tea at St. Albyn's, that being a form of civility which

is, as a rule, reserved for those who are not quite good enough to be asked to dinner; but, on the other hand, you can cram seventy or eighty people into your rooms at a tea-party, whereas you can hardly (if you live in an ordinary ecclesiastical dwelling) assemble more than sixteen, at the outside, round your dinner-table, and it is not impossible that Mrs. Pickersgill, who knew what she was about, desired to make her gracious recognition of the returned prodigal as public as might be. When all was said, the Chaines were a county family, and Mrs. John Chaine was the daughter of the Dean.

Mrs. John Chaine, however, omitted to take advantage of the hospitality proffered to her. When she received a printed intimation that Mrs. Pickersgill would be at home on a certain afternoon from 4.30 to 7 o'clock, she showed the card to her husband, who said promptly and emphatically that he didn't want to go unless she did, and, as the favour of a reply was not requested, it came to pass that an interesting pair neither answered Mrs. Pickers-

gill's invitation nor availed themselves of it. This was rather disappointing both to the expectant hostess and to her expectant guests, and the presence of Wilfrid Chaine, who arrived early, and who, as be seemed a newly-elected member of Parliament, took great pains to make himself agreeable to everybody, scarcely sufficed to console them.

Nevertheless, Wilfrid was rewarded by many kind words and looks. He had at least, it was felt, done all that any man could do for an erring or eccentric brother, and if, in his anxiety to exculpate the erring or eccentric one, he had resorted to courses which might be open to exception from the point of view of strict morality, that could not be called an unpardonable offence. The old ladies, indeed, made a point of telling him that they did not hold him in any way to blame for John's obvious and somewhat ill-advised reluctance to meet them. He laughed pleasantly and affected not to understand their meaning; but it was noticed that he did not challenge the old ladies to put their hints into plainer

language, nor did he boldly assert that a cruel wrong had been done to one who, but for that wrong, would probably have been in the enjoyment of his own present revenues.

For the rest, although he appreciated the importance of conciliating the old ladies, he was, for the time being, more desirous of ingratiating himself with the young ones—or at least with one of the young ones, who made her appearance rather late, and to whom he hastened to offer a cup of tea.

‘Thank you,’ answered Violet, looking over his head; ‘I don’t mind tea if there’s nothing better to be had. Do you think you could find out whether it has run to chocolate? It often does on these specially festive occasions. Or if they absolutely refuse to give you chocolate, perhaps you might appeal to their better feelings to produce a cup of coffee. There *must* be coffee in the house.’

Wilfrid, as in duty bound, departed upon this quest, which gave her the opportunity that she had wanted of making a barely

perceptible signal to his younger brother. Hubert was by her side in a moment.

‘I was wondering whether I might venture to speak to you,’ he said joyfully. ‘I’m on duty this afternoon, worse luck! and I shall have to be off presently; but I thought I would just look in here for a minute upon the chance. You’ve seen poor old John, I suppose?’

Violet made a grimace. ‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘I have; and, at the risk of shocking you beyond all measure, I will confess that I wish I hadn’t. I wish he weren’t in a state to be seen! I wish he were as dead as he pretended to be! Now you are horrified, and I’m sure you don’t in the least understand what I can be driving at. Men may be superior to women in some ways, and I have never denied that they are; but their utter blindness and stupidity would be scorned by any school-girl of fifteen. Well, we won’t talk about your eldest brother; there isn’t time; and if you think his having popped up out of his grave in this extraordinary manner is a thing

to jump about and clap your hands over, you had better jump about and clap your hands until you grow old enough to see an inch before your nose. What I want to say is something that you *can* understand. I want to tell you that you mustn't be indignant or begin imagining all sorts of things that aren't true if I avoid speaking to you in public after this. Somebody has been talking to my mother about our riding home from hunting together, and she has worked herself up into a state of mind. In fact, the reason why she isn't here now is that she has had to lie down with a bad headache in consequence of my undutiful behaviour. Now, you know, she might quite reasonably order me to cut you outright, and I might have to do it. I believe I really *ought* to do it without being ordered; but perhaps it may not be necessary to take such an extreme step if only you will be a little careful. Do you see?'

'Yes, of course I do,' answered Hubert, 'and I'll go away at once. But——'

'I assure you there isn't any "But" just at

present ; I only wanted to caution you against taking offence at anything you may see me do or hear of my having done. You must try to believe that I am not fickle, whatever else I may be. Now go away, please ; I would rather you weren't with me when your brother Wilfrid comes back. I have sent him off in search of some refreshments which don't exist, and he will be here presently to announce his failure.'

Hubert was only too thankful to accept her statement that she was not chargeable with fickleness ; but he certainly did exhibit a little of the stupidity which she had imputed to his sex at large by lingering for a moment to say : ' Oh, Wilfrid will be all right ; *he* wouldn't go and tell tales. I did consult him once about our affairs, and I must confess that he wasn't over and above encouraging ; but that was because he thought you were—he had an idea that——'

' Oh, bother his ideas about me ! ' interrupted Violet impatiently. ' My personal belief is that he is capable of any mean trick ;



but you are not to stay and defend him, please. You wouldn't change my opinion if you did, and you would very likely get me into trouble into the bargain.'

Now, it may have been stupid of Hubert to believe in his brother's disinterestedness, and it may have been sharp of Violet to have divined that gentleman's true character. She was, however, wrong in her surmise that it had been he who had taken upon himself to read Mrs. Stanton a lecture. Wilfrid had had neither time nor opportunity to notice incidents which had set the tongues of less busy persons wagging; added to which, he thought too highly of Violet's common sense to believe in any danger of her throwing herself away upon a poverty-stricken young soldier. He was, indeed, extremely sanguine as to his own chances of success with her; and, now that the election business was off his hands, he was resolved to lose no time in substituting certainty for hope.

'Here is your coffee,' he said, making his way back to her side at length; 'chocolate, I

regret to tell you, was not to be had for love or money.'

'Coffee will do very well, thank you,' answered Violet, with a gracious smile. 'I am sorry you should have had so much trouble.'

She had come to the conclusion that it would be wise, under the circumstances, to propitiate Wilfrid, and she promised herself that she would at some future time make up for present prudence and complaisance by letting him hear a few incisive home truths. Her plan was to keep him in good humour by allowing him to prosecute his suit, while taking good care to hold him at a respectful distance; and this plan might have worked well enough had he been disposed to lend himself to it. Such, however, was by no means his intention. After he had stood talking to her for a quarter of an hour or so, and after she had done violence to her inclinations by responding amiably to his remarks upon the subject of fox-hunting, which he had introduced as being the one most likely to

interest her, she wished him good evening, saying that it was time for her to go.

‘Are you walking home alone?’ he asked. ‘Won’t you let me see you as far as your door? It is pitch dark outside, you know.’

Violet declared that she was quite accustomed to being out in the dark and that she really did not require an escort to protect her against the few respectable citizens whom she would probably meet between the Precincts and her own abode; but, as he insisted, she gave way, with a slight jerk of her shoulders. The point was hardly worth disputing about.

Yet no sooner were she and Wilfrid walking side by side through the semi-darkness of the echoing cloisters than she wished with all her heart that she had thought of requesting one of the old ladies to accompany them and protect her against her protector. For she perceived, to her consternation, that Wilfrid’s voice and manner had undergone a sudden change, and that, unless he could be stopped, a crisis must inevitably be precipitated. The question was how to stop him—

he was advancing at such an alarming pace! Already he had told her how lonely his life was in his great, empty house; already he had alluded to the varied and agreeable existence led by the families of members of Parliament—half the year spent amidst the gaieties of London society and half devoted to the enjoyment of field-sports—now he was confiding to her that his parents had always urged him to marry, but that he had been unable to oblige them, because he had never until recently met any woman of whom he could truly and conscientiously say that he loved her. One step more and he would be over the brink!

‘Oh, you don’t like solitary grandeur?’ broke in Violet desperately. ‘Then why don’t you give up Chaine Court to your elder brother? It *ought* to be his, I suppose.’ And she thought to herself, ‘Heaven grant that that bucket of cold water may chill him for another hundred yards or so! Once we are in the High Street it will be all right; no man with any sense of self-respect would make

an offer of marriage in the High Street of a populous town.'

Wilfrid certainly was a little chilled. He had to point out that such a sacrifice as Miss Stanton suggested would be almost, if not quite, immoral; that he had a sincere affection for John, and had, he believed, given proofs of it; but that he could not, even if he wished to do so, assume the responsibility of setting his father's will at nought—and a good deal more to the like effect. Violet demurred; wanted to know whether it would be moral to uphold a will which had been executed under the influence of false impressions, and gradually managed to provoke Wilfrid so far that he exclaimed with a sneer:

'These, I presume, are Ida's sentiments. Really she is rather hard to please! One would think that she felt the need of some substantial consolation for her husband's return, instead of regarding that as an unmixed and unexpected blessing.'

'This is capital!' thought Violet, as she and her companion turned the corner of the

narrow alley which led into the High Street, and reached the cheerful glare of the shop-windows; 'all I have to do now is to keep the ball rolling.'

Mrs. Stanton, however, did not live in the High Street, and there were certain unfrequented byways to be traversed before she could hope to shake off her suitor. Wilfrid had doubtless remembered that fact; for he took advantage of the first moment of solitude and obscurity to dismiss the subject which had afforded them matter for argument so far.

'Well, we won't quarrel over it,' said he, laughingly; 'I won't even quarrel with Ida; though I must say that she never loses an opportunity of trying to quarrel with me. It wasn't about her or about John either that I wanted to speak to you. Miss Stanton——'

'I am going to run,' interrupted Violet suddenly. 'I always do run when I'm cold, and I shall be home in two seconds. Of course I don't expect you to run with me, though. Good night; many thanks for having come so far.'

And before he could make any answer she was off, like a hare.

For one moment he thought of pursuing her ; but he felt that that would be a little too ridiculous. Who could gasp out a proposal at a slinging trot ? So he turned on his heel, with a smile, understanding that she had intended to baffle him, but not considering that as in any degree an unfavourable omen. Has it not from time immemorial been the habit of women to run away when they wish to be caught ?

If he had not been too absorbed in his pleasant musings to take note of external objects, he would have seen a woman who was even now crossing the road to meet him, and from whom, when he recognised her, he himself would fain have run away. That being out of the question, he stopped short and said sternly : ‘ What are you doing here, Jessie ? ’

‘ Waiting for a word with you,’ Mrs. Viccars replied, as though her presence in St. Albyn’s required no other explanation. ‘ You

can't say I've been a trouble to you since we parted,' she went on; 'I haven't molested you in any way, and it was no fault of mine that you were interrupted at your meeting that evening. You may be a member of Parliament or you may be Prime Minister for all I care; but one thing I won't let you do—and I'm here to give you fair warning of it—I won't let you marry that girl.'

'You mean Miss Stanton, perhaps? Well, my good Jessie, I may or I may not marry Miss Stanton; that is a matter of complete uncertainty at present. But what is a matter of complete certainty is that you cannot prevent my marrying whom I please and when I please; and I am sorry you should have taken the trouble to come here in order to talk such nonsense. Since you are here, however, I may remind you that you will forfeit your allowance if you become troublesome.'

'I am beginning to earn money as a dress-maker,' Mrs. Viccars replied; 'I shall soon be able to do without your charity. As for my being able to prevent you from marrying, you



know very well that I can tell your story and mine ; and what's more, I'll do it sooner than let you make another woman as miserable as you have made me. Don't think I want to marry you myself—I declare before Heaven that I wouldn't have you now if you went down on your bended knees to me !—but I'll take good care that nobody else shall marry you. That's all I had to say. You had better bear it in mind, because I mean it.'

She turned and walked quickly away, Wilfrid making no effort to detain her. He was slightly perturbed but not much alarmed ; for the woman's threat was, after all, an empty one, and her story, if ever she should see fit to tell it to Violet Stanton, would hardly be believed in the face of his flat denial and in the absence of all corroborative testimony. Then a sudden chill came over him as he remembered that John knew all about her. That, to be sure, was a very awkward and unlucky circumstance.

'Her mouth must be stopped somehow,' he reflected frowningly. 'Another hundred a

year would purchase silence, no doubt ; but a better plan would be to get somebody to marry her, for she would scarcely care to relate all her past experiences to her husband. I must see old Mould and sound him upon the subject. A London tradesman would be the most satisfactory sort of person ; but even a St. Albyn's tradesman would answer the purpose. All this is very annoying, though. Oh, my good John, what an unmitigated nuisance you are to your kith and kin, and what a crowning act of bad taste you committed when you returned to a world which was getting on so comfortably without you !'





## CHAPTER XL

### HUBERT IS DISQUIETED

It would be strange indeed if, in a world which is already beginning to show symptoms of becoming over-populated, the square men could always be fitted into the square holes and the round men into the round ones. It is the destiny of mortals in general to accommodate themselves to circumstances, to submit resignedly to uncongenial pursuits, to earn their living as best they may, and discharge their daily duties in accordance with the precepts of the Church Catechism. Yet Nature seldom fails to exhibit a mild protest against human interference with her designs, so that we are continually coming across lawyers who should by rights have been soldiers, officers who might have done rather better as missionaries, bishops who look like ill-disguised

butlers—even here and there an author whose special gifts would seem to have marked him out for success in the publishing trade ; while upon the outskirts of St. Albyn's there dwelt a humble market-gardener who, if only he had been born noble or wealthy, would not improbably have done brilliant service to his country and himself in the diplomatic field.

Nothing could have been more discreet or more full of tact than the manner in which Mr. Mould received Wilfrid Chaine (who called to order a consignment of eucharis lilies) and the answers that he returned to that kind-hearted gentleman's inquiries about his daughter and her prospects. She had indeed been most unfortunate, he said, and Mr. Chaine was very right in believing that he would rejoice to see her married a second time to some decent man. As far as that went, there *was* a decent man—Fletcher the poulterer, in fact—who had as good as declared his readiness to come forward—with a little encouragement. This, it was further explained, did not signify personal so much

as pecuniary encouragement, which poor Mr. Mould, unhappily, had it not in his power to offer. No; he did not know of any other candidate for the vacant honour; certainly not of any in London. He greatly feared that, all things considered, there could be little hope of securing a candidate without the inducement of some more or less tempting pecuniary bait.

By what dexterous ambiguities of language it was insinuated, understood and agreed that the said bait should not be found wanting when required it is needless to relate; but Mr. Mould, as he bowed his beneficent patron out, flattered himself that he had done a tolerably good afternoon's work, while Wilfrid walked away to call upon Mrs. Stanton with a sense of restored good humour and relief. His spirits, to be sure, were a trifle lowered when he found only Mrs. Stanton at home; but he said to himself that he would have better luck next time, and he was too polite to make his disappointment unduly obvious.

However, he did not have better luck the

next time, nor the next, nor the next after that. In short, it was perfectly clear that Violet was determined to avoid meeting him, which really seemed to be carrying coyness a little beyond its legitimate limits. In vain he sought her high and low; in vain he followed the hounds; in vain he loitered about the streets. Never a glimpse could he obtain of her, and little did he suspect that she had obtained many a glimpse of him and had dodged round many a corner to escape him.

Perhaps it would not have consoled him much to know that his younger brother was faring no better. Hubert also was very anxious to have a word or two with Violet, just by way of continuation and elucidation of the hurried colloquy which he had held with her at Mrs. Pickersgill's tea-party. Subsequent pondering over her remarks on that occasion had caused him a certain uneasiness and bewilderment; evidently she had meant to prepare him for something which he would not like, something which might be expected to make him jealous, and he was extremely

desirous to hear what that was. His curiosity, however, was apparently doomed to remain ungratified; for not only was Miss Stanton invisible in the Precincts and the streets, but she had not been out hunting for nearly a fortnight. It was a trying period of suspense; nor did he get much comfort out of Ida, who had somehow seemed to be less friendly and less interested in him since her husband's return.

A fragment of conversation which chanced to catch his ear as he was entering the billiard-room after mess, one evening, did not serve to allay the misgivings from which he was suffering.

'Oh, she ain't a bad sort of girl, as girls go,' one juvenile, gold-laced man of the world was saying to another; 'but she has a pretty keen eye to the main chance. Did all she knew to catch old Harvey Amherst last spring, and deuced nearly succeeded too; only she played fast and loose with the old boy a bit too long, so he went off in a huff. Now she's trying the same game on with Chaine.

She won't let *him* slip through her fingers, you'll see. Rough on our friend Hubert; but after all one don't want married men in the regiment, and——'

At this point the individual whose name had just been mentioned advanced into the light, whereupon the speaker became mute and very red in the face.

Ill-natured, silly and false things are said about everybody—are said, perhaps, almost as often in clubs and mess-rooms as round ladies' tea-tables—and the wise and philosophical of mankind know better than to pay any heed to them. But since the wise and philosophical form a small minority of mankind, and since Hubert Chaine would never have dreamt of describing himself as belonging to that minority, it is not surprising that he should have been disquieted by what he had overheard. Although his faith in Violet had remained unshaken, his faith in Wilfrid had received a rude shock; nor could he help suspecting that he had at last discovered what it was that Violet had warned him against



treating as a subject for alarm. It came into his head the next afternoon that he would ride across to the White House and talk it all over with old John. John was not clever, like Wilfrid, but he was honest and trustworthy, and at least he would not be likely to laugh at an unfortunate fellow for having obeyed one of Nature's laws by falling in love.

John had never been much given to laughing at anybody, and nowadays he seldom laughed at all. Hubert found him in his gun-room, examining the locks of some weapons which he had apparently been employed in cleaning, and he held out his hand, with a pleased look, saying in that new, subdued voice of his :

‘Well, my boy, how are you? Would you care to come out with me and knock over a few partridges? I’ve got Wilfrid’s leave. He hasn’t begun to shoot the coverts yet; but I dare say we may put up a hedgerow pheasant.’

‘I haven’t brought my gun,’ answered the

younger brother; 'I came over because I thought I should rather like to have a chat with you.'

'Oh, I'll give you a gun,' John said, 'and we can talk just as well out of doors as in—rather better, perhaps. I was only going out shooting because I wanted an excuse for a walk. You see,' he added rather pathetically, 'I must find some excuse for getting out of the way, and it isn't always easy, now that I've no regular occupation. A man oughtn't to hang about the house all day long; the women don't like it, you know.'

'Don't they?' said Hubert. He was upon the point of adding that he was sure Ida could not be tired of her husband's society yet; but, as he was not really quite sure of that, and as the memory of Violet's remarks at Mrs. Pickersgill's tea-party recurred inopportunately to him, he checked himself. Then, perceiving that John's eyes were fixed upon him with a quiet and faintly-amused curiosity as to what he was going to say next, he jumped up hastily and decided to leave well alone.

‘Come on! we shan’t have much light to shoot by if we don’t look sharp,’ was the observation which suggested itself to him as being the safest and most appropriate under the circumstances.

So presently the two set forth, accompanied by John’s old Gordon setter, and between them they bagged three brace and a half of partridges in the first field—which was pretty well. That measure of success, however, seemed sufficient to satisfy the ardour of one of the sportsmen; for when they reached a stile, Hubert, instead of crossing it, seated himself on the top rail and said:

‘Look here, John; let’s take it easy for a bit, shall we? I want to tell you about all the trouble I’ve been getting into since you went away.’

He accordingly embarked upon a circumstantial history of his love-affair, while John, to whom this was not precisely news, the facts having already been communicated to him by Ida, listened patiently and sympathisingly, and refrained from interrupting the narrator.

When Hubert paused and it seemed incumbent upon him to say something, he could find no more comforting comment to make than—

‘Well, old chap, I’m sorry for you, and I wish I could do anything to help you both; but, as you know, I haven’t a penny to call my own. And I’m afraid things don’t look particularly promising for you.’

‘Oh, I shall make money enough to marry upon,’ returned the other with easy confidence; ‘I shall get a staff appointment or something. It isn’t that; but—you see, there’s no actual engagement, because she won’t consent to an engagement so long as her mother objects, and——’ He did not finish his sentence, but, after a momentary break, added abruptly, ‘I say, John, what do you think of Wilfrid?’

John raised his faded eyes, with a half-wondering, half-apprehensive look. ‘What do I think of him?’ he repeated slowly.

‘I mean, do you think he is a double-faced fellow—the sort of fellow to serve one a dirty turn behind one’s back?’

John lowered his eyes and drew his fingers through his grizzled beard; he was evidently unwilling to reply. At length he answered by a counter-question. 'Why do you ask?'

Hubert explained in as few words as possible. He admitted that Wilfrid had a perfect right to pay his addresses to Miss Stanton. 'But I don't think he ought to do it without saying anything to me; I don't think it would be quite straight or fair, you know. Of course I hope the story isn't true. Not that I have the slightest fear of her accepting him; only if he has serious intentions, the situation would be awkward both for him and for me, don't you see?'

'I doubt whether he would feel it so,' answered John slowly. 'And I don't know why you should.'

'What! not awkward to have my own brother as a rival?'

'Perhaps experience has hardened me to that sensation,' remarked John, with a rather bitter smile. 'You, at all events, have nothing to reproach yourself with, since you have told

him all about it; and if you are sure that she will refuse him, what does it signify after all?’

Hubert remained silent. He was not satisfied, yet he hardly knew in what terms he could render his dissatisfaction intelligible. ‘You haven’t answered my question yet,’ he observed at last.

‘Your question about Wilfrid’s straightforwardness, you mean? No, I haven’t answered it; and, if you’ll excuse me, my dear fellow, I’d rather not. There’s no good in answering such questions. I dare say Wilfrid isn’t quite such a simple, honest chap as you are—I’ve known him act in a way that didn’t seem to me perfectly open and above-board—but what then? We must take people as we find them, and I expect most people aren’t half as bad as we are inclined to suppose when they happen to rub us the wrong way.’

‘You know,’ continued Hubert, feeling a little ashamed of himself for saying this, ‘Ida always maintained that Wilfrid was to blame

for your having left the country as you did, instead of standing your ground and proving your innocence—which I firmly believe you could have done.’

‘I think,’ answered John with a sigh, ‘Ida is not convinced that I alone was to blame for that unlucky piece of cowardice. Wilfrid naturally wished to save my neck; it was impossible for him to swear that I hadn’t killed the man.’

The subject was evidently painful and distasteful to him; nor could he be persuaded to say anything more about it, though Hubert strongly suspected that he might have said a good deal more, had he been so minded. Instead of doing that, he delivered himself of a kindly homily, in which Hubert was exhorted to keep a good heart, to trust the girl whom he loved and, above all, never to let his thoughts be poisoned by jealousy and suspicion. ‘Which are just as certain to bring their own punishment as drunkenness or any other vice,’ poor John said sorrowfully.

However, it is easier to preach than to

practise, easier for us all to point out pitfalls to others than to avoid them ourselves; and John, though calamity had so greatly changed and softened him, could not change his nature. He could not help being suspicious and jealous; all he could do was to keep his feelings to himself. Nevertheless, there was something—not a mere sentiment, but a matter of positive knowledge—which he ought not, perhaps, to keep entirely to himself. He had not forgotten Jessie Viccars; he had not forgotten the letter which had been in his breast-pocket on that fatal night, and which he had never set eyes on since; once and again during his exile he had thought of it, and had formed conjectures which had hardly seemed worth pursuing, since he had at that time deemed himself to all intents and purposes a dead man. But now that he was alive again, now that he was home again, might it not be his duty to speak to Wilfrid? This was a question which he asked himself several times as he sat alone before the fire in his den, after Hubert had left him; and, truth



to tell, his strong desire was to answer it in the negative. He had no heart for quarrelling, no wish to give trouble to anybody—least of all to Wilfrid, against whom he was penitently conscious of harbouring a sore feeling; he only wanted to end his days in peace. And, after all, what good would he do by raking up a somewhat scandalous story? he might, to be sure, prevent Miss Stanton from marrying Wilfrid; but it by no means followed as a matter of course that he would, and indeed such an end could scarcely be held to justify the employment of such means. No! if the girl was worth anything she would remain faithful to the man whom she had confessed that she loved, and if she was worth nothing—well, then she would perhaps be more fitly mated with his rival.

John had reached this point in his musings when Ida entered the room.

‘Oh, I didn’t know you were here,’ she said coldly; ‘I only came to look for a book.’

‘Can I find it for you?’ asked John,

jumping up with alacrity. 'Is it in one of the bookcases?'

'Please don't trouble,' she answered, with a touch of irritation; 'I don't know exactly where it is, and I don't care enough about it to search for it now. I can come again some time when you are out.'

And she was gone before he could remonstrate.

Meekly and disconsolately he returned to his arm-chair and his meditations. He knew very well now that he was a weariness and an affliction to his wife, and that he never would be anything else until he died. 'And it seems that I take a lot of killing,' he thought, with a rueful smile.





## CHAPTER XLI

### WINTER AND DISCONTENT

THE year was drawing towards its close ; Christmas, that season which casts its shadow such a very long time before it, and the approach of which is heralded by so many signs which cannot possibly be taken as portending peace and goodwill to the majority of mankind, was well in sight ; the last dead leaves had been swept away from the lawns at Chainé Court and the White House ; the flower-beds were brown and bare. As for the inhabitants of those desirable residences, only one of them was at all out of harmony with Nature's melancholy mood ; and even he was scarcely in such high spirits as his general prosperity might have been expected to induce, because he was becoming provoked beyond endurance by Violet Stanton's persistent

evasion of him. He did, in the long run, contrive to meet her and speak with her—that was an almost unavoidable contingency—but she took very good care that he should never meet her or speak with her in private. His attentions to her, when they did meet, were as assiduous and undisguised as they could be made in the presence of lookers-on; the lookers-on took note of them, as indeed he intended that they should; she herself received them without any apparent displeasure. Only, she gave him no second chance of walking home with her in the dusk, nor was it his good fortune to encounter her in the hunting-field.

Hunting, in fact, had for the present come to an end. A period of that half-hearted weather detestable alike to fox-hunters and to skaters had set in, the thermometer always hovering about freezing-point, the hard ground coated with a treacherous, slippery surface, the dull sky threatening a thaw which never came. What occupation was there left for fox-hunters, skaters, or others, save to sit in clusters round the fire and abuse a climate in which the

miseries of damp are superadded to those of bitter cold? There is, to be sure, some consolation to be derived from a fire; but to enjoy it properly one must either do so alone or in the company of one other person, and only the former alternative was open to Wilfrid, while Hubert got neither. What Hubert got, and had to make the most of, was an occasional furtive nod, and, every now and again, a whispered word or two; he could not, like his more fortunate brother, ring boldly at Mrs. Stanton's door four or five times a week.

Not that Wilfrid advanced matters much by ringing at Mrs. Stanton's door or by being welcomed and purred over by that sympathetic lady. Either she had a very large acquaintance or she was singularly hospitable; for never did he apply to her for a cup of tea without finding her surrounded by half a dozen friends whom her daughter had brought in to partake of the same harmless refreshment. Sometimes the friends were there and the daughter was absent, which was intoler-

able. At such times his stay was brief, and his return to Chainé Court interrupted by many fruitless loiterings.

Now, Violet was well aware that there was a strong probability of her being overtaken or intercepted by him on the road that led from St. Albyn's towards the White House, and this it was, as much as anything else, which had caused her to treat her friend Ida with some neglect of late. However, one cannot, unless one happens to be the Emperor of Russia, provide against every conceivable risk; so one afternoon she set forth on foot to inquire how the world was going with one whom she had reason to believe that it was not treating too well, and she was fortunate enough to reach her goal without let or hindrance.

'Better late than never,' was Ida's greeting; 'I thought you had forgotten your way here.'

'No,' answered the girl, 'I haven't forgotten it; but in this atrocious weather one hardly dares to ride, and Wicks has sold his pony, so that I can't go about on wheels at

present. I came over upon my ten toes this afternoon, and half a dozen times I was within an ace of taking ten pounds off my value by slipping up and breaking my knees. Did you ever in your life know such weather !'

The weather had, at all events, the merit of providing them with a subject for conversation, and they dwelt upon it at greater length than they would have done in happier times. It was not easy to talk about matters which really interested both of them, because each was painfully conscious that the other knew a little too much. To Ida, at least, nothing could be said ; those nearest and dearest to her were bound to maintain a pious fiction to the effect that she was happy in the recovery of her lost husband. In Violet's case there would not, of course, have been the same need for reticence had she been disposed to be confidential ; but, her conscience being ill at ease, she was not so disposed. She had not discouraged Wilfrid ; Ida, she thought, had most likely heard that she had not discouraged him ; nor—for reasons

of which she was quite convinced that Ida would disapprove—did she intend to discourage him. Her visit, therefore, was merely meant to convey the impression that she was neither forgetful of old friends nor ungrateful for past kindness, and if she was not entirely successful in conveying that impression, she succeeded at least in giving no excuse for embarrassing inquiries.

Ida, if the whole truth must be told about her, was too overwhelmed by the burden of her own difficulties and anxieties to spare much sympathy for those of others. She had no doubt that Wilfrid would propose to Violet, that Violet would refuse him and that Hubert would eventually be accepted; there was, after all, nothing particularly tragic about this girl's lot, present or to come. Meanwhile, her heart was somewhat hardened against a friend who had not one word of pity to throw to her, and upon whom (if the friend had dared to do any such thing) she would have turned like a bear with a sore head. Irremediable calamity, which is apt



to make most of us unreasonable, almost always produces that effect upon women, who, it may be, have not a very large stock of sweet reasonableness to start with.

Thus it happened that the two ladies conversed much as though there had been a third person present, until the fading light warned Violet that it was high time for her to take her leave.

‘Are you really going to walk all that way back in the dark by yourself?’ Ida inquired.

Violet was not afraid of the dark; but there were other perils from which she was extremely anxious to be shielded; so, rather to the surprise of her questioner, she answered: ‘Well, I was wondering whether there was anybody about the premises who would be good enough to see me as far as the gas-lamps. I suppose Mr. Chaine isn’t at home, is he?’

‘I believe he is,’ said Ida wonderingly, ‘and I can send for him if you like. But—wouldn’t you rather have one of the servants? Won’t he bore you dreadfully?’

‘Oh no ; it is I who shall bore him. Still, if he doesn’t care about a cold, dismal walk, I dare say he will have presence of mind enough to decline.’

But John, when summoned, declared that he was only too glad of an excuse to stretch his legs ; so presently Miss Stanton and he left the house together, the former thinking to herself, ‘That’s all right ! If Chaine, M.P., is lurking about anywhere in the neighbourhood he may join us and welcome. This valuable old creature won’t fall back to the rear as a servant would have done.’

The valuable old creature was not without some inkling of the value of his companionship, and of the causes which might have led to its solicitation ; he was only uncertain whether it was Wilfrid or Hubert whom Miss Stanton dreaded meeting. His acquaintance with her was of the slightest ; but he was pleased by her frank, easy manner, and so (the darkness helping to lend him audacity) he took upon himself to say, after a time : ‘Hubert has been telling me about his

sorrows. I hope it isn't an impertinence to confess that I am on Hubert's side.'

'On his side?' echoed Violet—for she was not a little taken aback, and said the first thing that came into her head—'But is there anybody on the other side?'

'Well, you know more about that than I do; but I thought that your mother, for one, was on the other side.'

'Oh, my mother of course—how could she help it? Every mother must be against an engagement which has no prospect of ending in a marriage. She would like me to engage myself to somebody who has money enough to support a wife; and she is quite right, you know.'

'No, Miss Stanton; I don't know that. Shall I tell you what I do know? It might be of some service to you perhaps if I did. I know that nothing in married life can possibly make up for the absence of mutual love. That's a funny sort of sentiment to come from an old fellow like me, isn't it? But then, as I think you must be aware, I

don't speak without experience of my subject. I loved my wife and I love her still ; but we have never been happy together, and we never could have been. I have nothing to reproach her with ; she didn't pretend to care for me ; she married me, I dare say, for the same reasons that may be making you think of marrying somebody else ; she was miserable with me ; when she thought I was dead she probably began to hope that better times might be in store for her ; then it turned out that I was still alive, and she naturally became tenfold more miserable than she had been before. If I were you, Miss Stanton, I wouldn't deliberately make myself as miserable as she is.'

He spoke so quietly and with so little apparent thought of his own hard case that Violet felt it would be almost insulting to express any compassion for him. She thanked him and promised to remember what he had said. 'Only,' she added, 'the fact remains that it is impossible to set up house upon an income of nothing a year.'

John had a good deal to urge in reply. He acknowledged that Hubert was at present badly off—too badly off, perhaps, to contemplate immediate matrimony. But in a year or so his circumstances might have improved; and indeed, so far as that went, he had already an income of his own, beyond his pay, though it was a small one. Suppose, for instance, he were to exchange to India, which would give him an increase of pay? Many officers did that sort of thing with a view to marrying; and although it might not be pleasant to go to India or to practise small daily economies, she might take his word for it that what would be a thousand times more unpleasant would be to remain in England, bound to a man whom she did not love, and who, at the best, would never be able to give her anything more than creature comforts as her share of a bad bargain.

Violet allowed him to talk on. His arguments were not required; but she did not think fit to tell him so, being doubtful

of the expediency of admitting that she was entirely of one mind with him. Nor was it until he had escorted her as far as her own door that she made so bold as to say :

‘Now, Mr. Chaine, you have given me a lot of good advice, and the least I can do is to give you a piece of good advice in return. Don’t you take things too much to heart ; it’s a mistake.’

‘I don’t quite understand,’ said John.

‘No ; it’s a great mistake to do that. You won’t succeed any better by throwing yourself under her feet and letting her trample upon you than by cracking a whip over her. I suppose it wouldn’t be any use to suggest that you should get up a mild flirtation with somebody ; but if you’ll just let her see—or at all events let her think—that you really don’t care, she will come round after a time. She *must*, because the simple truth is that you are much too good to be trampled upon. Good-night.’

Violet was perhaps justified in describing this as good advice ; and indeed the advice

of one woman as to the treatment of another generally is good, the only drawback thereto being that those who receive it are seldom capable of profiting by it. At any rate, John Chaine's limited powers of dissimulation were not equal to the suggested effort; nor, even if they had been, would he have deemed it worth while to exert them. The time-honoured stratagem of pretending indifference might be well enough adapted for the use of young lovers; but that any assistance could be derived from it in such a case as his he really could not believe. So, notwithstanding the sincere gratitude that he felt to Violet for taking an interest in him and his troubles, he continued to abase himself at his wife's feet as before—which was doubtless one reason why she continued to trample upon him.

Her conscience, it is true, reproached her for the irritated or ironical accents in which she too often addressed him; but she could not go the length of admitting that he did not deserve to be so addressed. A man,

she thought, may be almost anything that he pleases except contemptible; no man has a right to be contemptible. It was upon this somewhat insufficient plea that she was endeavouring to justify herself as she left the house after breakfast one dull, wintry morning, carrying a basket, of which the contents were intended for distribution amongst the sick and suffering. She might have included herself in the above category, for she had a headache, in addition to her usual heartache; still that hardly excused her for having snapped viciously at the submissive John and scolded the servants all round. 'At this rate, I shall be a sour old virago in a year or two,' she thought, with a rueful smile.

Well, at any rate, that was not what her poor people thought about her. They accepted her doles with all the more gratitude because these were surreptitious doles, scarcely sanctioned or approved of by the Vicar of the parish; they poured into her ears that long list of undeserved woes which



they had ever on hand and which they found such satisfaction in relating, and they gratified her with flattery which she tried to think might be partially sincere. If they did nothing else for her, they enabled her to get through the morning; so that she was in a less irritable temper when she set her face homewards, swinging her empty basket and quickening her pace, lest she should be overtaken by the impending snowstorm, of which the first flakes were beginning to flutter down. Her way led her along the lane in which she had once come across Arthur, and of course she could not help thinking of that day and contrasting it with the mournful present. Since then the hedgerows had been stripped bare, the wild flowers had vanished, the joyous beauty of early summer was as dead as her own hopes—as dead, very likely, as Arthur's love for her was, or soon would be. As she drew near the exact spot where their meeting had taken place her eyes became blind with tears; yet not so blind but that they served

to show her a figure at the sight of which her heart suddenly stood still. She too stood still; but she had neither the presence of mind nor the strength to turn and fly; for Arthur was already advancing towards her—yes; Arthur himself, though his face was so pale and worn that she might well have failed to recognise him.

‘Oh, why have you done this?’ she exclaimed. ‘You promised me that you wouldn’t.’

‘I didn’t do it on purpose,’ he answered, without taking off his hat or holding out his hand—indeed they were both too agitated to waste a thought upon conventional forms—‘I wanted to see this place again; I didn’t suppose that you would be out in such weather. God knows I had no wish to disobey you or—or——’

‘Or to add to my unhappiness? Let me pass, then; that is all you can do for me.’

He stood aside at once, and she made as though she would go her way; but there are forms of self-denial which are almost

too great to be required of poor human nature, and perhaps she did not walk quite as fast as she might have done.

‘Ida,’ he said, in a stifled voice, ‘will you tell me just one thing? Are you very unhappy?’

She paused and looked at him. ‘As unhappy as it is possible to be,’ she replied. ‘Did you, by any chance, think that I was enjoying myself?’

‘No,’ he groaned; ‘I wish I could think so! That would be better than facing the truth, as I must whenever I allow my mind to dwell upon it.’

‘Then don’t allow your mind to dwell upon it,’ she returned brusquely; ‘why should you? You have plenty of other things to think about, and nothing is more foolish than crying over spilt milk, you know.’

‘Don’t speak to me like that!’ he exclaimed hotly. ‘What sin have I committed? How could I tell?—how could I possibly guess that this infernal torture was to be inflicted upon us?’

His anger and his evident pain soothed her own quivering nerves. 'We ought not to speak to each other at all,' she said, in a gentler tone; 'we can't speak without saying things which it would be better to leave unsaid. It would be absurd to pretend that I am not unhappy; but I shall grow resigned in time—everybody does grow resigned to everything—and so will you. Remember, I *wish* you to try and forget me.'

She turned away; but he caught her up and exclaimed impetuously, 'Ida, *must* you live with him?' Then, seeing the startled look in her face, he added, 'No; I don't mean that; I would never ask you to come to me or to do anything wrong. But would it be wrong to leave that man?'

'Yes; I think so,' she answered. 'I have treated him badly, and I am treating him badly still; but he is kind to me, and I am his wife. No; there can be no escape for me—no escape except death. For mercy's sake, don't let me see you again. Good-bye.'

He said something, the sense of which

she hardly caught at the time, though she tried to put the broken words together afterwards—something about his unalterable love and the sorrow that it was to him to have brought sorrow upon her. After all, it did not signify much what he said. Her one thought, as she hastened away through the falling snow, was that she had done well to leave him; for in another moment she must have thrown herself into his arms and sobbed out her wretchedness upon his breast.





## CHAPTER XLII

### WILFRID'S HOSPITALITY

A HAPPY inspiration came to Wilfrid one day when he was wondering, with half-amused, half-vexed bewilderment, how much longer he would be expected to struggle against the difficulties with which women delight to tantalise their wooers. Why should he not ask his mother to come down and spend Christmas with him? It would be quite the right and proper thing to do; it would please the old lady; it would enable him to show some quiet hospitality to his neighbours; above all, it would compel Miss Stanton to gladden Chaine Court once more with the sunshine of her presence. For the girl could not decently omit to pay her respects to one from whom she had been the recipient of so many kindnesses in days gone by.

‘What a fool I was not to think of it before!’ muttered Wilfrid, as he sat down to compose a filial and affectionate letter of invitation.

On other grounds than those which he had in his mind at the time he had perhaps been a little remiss, and Lady Elizabeth, who was looking forward to spending a solitary Christmas in London, preparatory to starting for the Riviera, whither many of her friends had already betaken themselves, may have felt a trifle hurt that no hint of any wish that she should join a family gathering had been conveyed to her. But it was Lady Elizabeth’s comforting creed that Wilfrid could do no wrong; so that, if he had abstained from begging her to revisit the old place at Christmas time, it might be assumed that there were very good reasons for his abstention. Very likely he, who was always so thoughtful for others, might fear lest the sight of familiar faces and surroundings should render more painful for her an anniversary which cannot but be

painful for all persons of her time of life. Besides, she said to herself, it was quite enough for her to know that her children were well and happy. John she had of course seen and had duly wept over. He had spent a day with her in London; she had expressed such maternal joy as it had been in her power to express or feel; she had commiserated him as much as he would allow her to do; then conversation had become somewhat difficult, and she had not been altogether sorry to bid him farewell. The company of John, she was fain to admit, would not tend to render the festivities of the festive season more hilarious.

Nevertheless, she jumped for joy when Wilfrid's letter was delivered to her, and hastened to respond thereto in person. By return of post, so to speak, she arrived at Chaine Court, where a warm welcome, a newly and artistically furnished bedroom and a staff of well-trained servants awaited her.

‘You have really managed to make yourself very comfortable,’ she said appreciatively



to her son, after they had come to the end of their *tête-à-tête* dinner, 'and your cook seems to understand her business. I am glad you are in Parliament too; it is always best to be in Parliament, I think, even though the House of Commons isn't what it used to be. There is only one thing that you want now.'

'Oh, of course,' answered Wilfrid, laughing. 'Well, between ourselves, I may tell you that the absence of that essential isn't owing to any lack of labour on my part. A more assiduous lover than I have shown myself during the last few weeks I may safely say that you wouldn't find anywhere within the four seas; but what is to be done with a young woman who is nowhere to be found when one searches for her? One can't ask her to one's house, you see, if one has the misfortune to be an unprotected male.'

'There is a young woman, then?' cried Lady Elizabeth excitedly. 'Who is she? Where is she? Why can't she be found?'

‘I suppose she isn’t to be found because she doesn’t choose to be,’ replied Wilfrid, smiling. ‘To the best of my belief she is at this moment in St. Albyn’s, and I don’t think you ought to ask who she is, considering that she is the young woman of your own selection.’

‘What, Violet Stanton? I had given up all hope of her—or rather all hope of you. Well, I am very glad—very glad indeed; for she is a nice girl, besides being pretty. No money, to be sure; but you can afford to waive that point. So you haven’t asked her yet?’

‘She won’t give me the chance.’

‘Oh, she shall give you the chance. I’ll have her up here at once and talk to her. Probably she thinks it only fair that you should be punished for having kept her waiting so long; but you needn’t be afraid that she will be such a goose as to refuse you.’

He was not very much afraid of that; but Lady Elizabeth herself was made aware that she had been somewhat over-sanguine when,

on the following morning, Ida trudged up to see her through the snow, beneath which the whole country-side was now shrouded. Ida, to whom the projected scheme was speedily revealed, perceived that it was time to speak out. She could not, of course, say anything in disparagement of Wilfrid; but it seemed advisable to reveal the true state of affairs as regarded Hubert; and this she did, concluding with an appeal to Lady Elizabeth's kindness of heart.

'It may not be what you like,' she observed; 'but there it is, and it can't be helped. I'm sure you won't try to put pressure upon the poor girl; she has more than enough of that to submit to from her mother, I am afraid.'

'Which shows that her mother is no fool,' returned the old lady testily. 'All this is the most preposterous nonsense that ever was, and I should like to box Hubert's ears for him! I remember that he got up a sort of flirtation with Violet when she was staying with the Hartlepools; I believe I told him at the time

that he was a silly boy, and that she would never look at him.'

'Well, she has looked at him now—and to some purpose,' Ida remarked.

'By your own account she hasn't accepted him, and really it is necessary to do one thing or the other. No, my dear; I am not going to back him up, if that is what you mean. My conscience wouldn't allow me to behave in such a senseless way; so you needn't ask it of me. For Violet's own sake I shall try to drive this rubbish out of her head and induce her to marry Wilfrid.'

'I don't think you will succeed,' said Ida, 'and I'm sure you won't deserve to succeed. How can you excuse yourself for encouraging a match in which, if there is any question of love—which I doubt—it will be all on one side?'

'In my opinion,' returned Lady Elizabeth snappishly—for she did not relish being lectured—'there is a deal too much talk about love nowadays. When I was young, it wasn't thought becoming in a girl to bestow her

affections right and left without with your leave or by your leave. One loved one's husband as a matter of course—I'm sure I loved mine—and I believe Violet is well-principled enough to see her duty as a wife and do it. These notions arise for the most part from not having children. It's partly that and partly vanity that makes young wives fancy themselves unhappy and insist upon confiding their sorrows to some good-for-nothing adorer whom they are pleased to call a friend. One knows how that sort of thing always ends. There is sure to be a fuss and a scandal, if there is nothing worse.'

There was no mistaking the personal application of these apparently irrelevant strictures, and for one moment Ida was within an ace of losing her temper. She controlled herself, however, and only replied: 'No doubt it is a misfortune to be childless; and it is also a very great misfortune to be mated with an uncongenial husband. I did not mean to suggest that Violet would disgrace herself in the event of her marrying Wilfrid: all I ven-

ture to assert is that she will be thoroughly unhappy if she marries him ; and I am certain that in your heart you agree with me.'

'Stuff and nonsense !' cried Lady Elizabeth. 'Who can force the girl to do anything that she doesn't want to do ? Certainly not I. You mustn't expect me to hand her a rope to hang herself with, though ; I leave that kindly office to you.'

Thus the two ladies parted rather more coldly than they had met ; and the younger said to herself disdainfully, as she plodded homewards, that there is a curious affinity between pious pretensions and a keen eye to the main chance.

As for the elder, she was virtuously conscious that her sole desire was to do the best she could for those near and dear to her ; and to one of these she said decisively at luncheon :

'You must write a line to Mrs. Stanton and ask her and her daughter to come to dinner. Ida and John and Hubert had better be invited to meet them, and you might

throw in the Dean to round the circle. In that way one will be able to see how the land lies and to take one's measures accordingly.'

She did not think it worth while to mention Hubert's ridiculous ambitions, since Wilfrid made no allusion to them ; but she promised herself that 'the boy,' as she still called him, should have a sharp scolding from her on the first opportunity.

It is not impossible that Hubert may have had some inkling of what was in store for him ; for he wrote to say that, owing to stress of duty, he must deny himself the pleasure of embracing his mother until the evening on which he had been asked to dine. But when that evening came he duly made his appearance, as did the other invited guests, and to him, as to them, the master of the house showed every civility and attention. That he should be something more than civil and attentive to Miss Stanton was only what might have been, and was, expected on all hands. As in duty bound, he took Mrs. Stanton in to dinner ; but Violet was placed

on his left hand, and it was Violet who was favoured with the lion's share of his conversation. John, her legitimate partner, had very little to say to her, though he listened to her while she talked and was rather troubled in mind by her vivacity. Was it, after all, quite fair either to her or to Hubert, he wondered, to let her take her chance of succumbing to the attractions of so dangerously fascinating a fellow as Wilfrid? By John's way of thinking Wilfrid was both fascinating and dangerous, and his youngest brother, gazing anxiously across from the other side of the table, was more than half inclined to agree with him.

Upon the whole, nobody, except perhaps Wilfrid himself and the Dean of St. Albyn's, enjoyed that very well-cooked and well-served little dinner; the remainder of the company were oppressed by a more or less vague presentiment of impending trouble, and were eager to hear what was coming next, so that they might decide upon their several courses of action in accordance therewith.

Hubert was the first to be relieved from



suspense ; for no sooner had he joined the ladies in the drawing-room, together with the other three men, none of whom had cared to sit long over their wine, than he was beckoned into a corner by his mother, who at once set to work to upbraid him.

‘What is all this that I hear about you and Violet?’ the old lady began. ‘It is really too bad of you to bring about complications which nothing can justify, and which can have no possible result except to cause annoyance and disappointment to your betters. I am very angry both with you and with Violet ; but especially with you ; because one does expect a full-grown man to have some slight sense of responsibility.’

‘Sorry you’re angry,’ answered Hubert, laying back his ears ; ‘but I can’t say I’m ashamed of anything that I’ve done. Just as a matter of curiosity, I should rather like to know who my annoyed and disappointed betters are.’

‘I am one, and Wilfrid is another. You silly boy ! didn’t I tell you long ago that

there was a prospect of a match being arranged between Wilfrid and the girl to whom it seems that you have been impertinent enough to propose? Well, that match is going to take place now—at least, I have every reason to hope so—and I am sure you must see the propriety of withdrawing and looking pleasant. To put it as mildly as one can, it is rather bad taste to offer your heart and hand to any woman when your hand is as empty as—as your head.'

'I'm not so sure about that,' returned Hubert doggedly. 'Anyhow, whether I'm a silly boy or a full-grown man, I certainly don't see the propriety of going back from my word. Violet isn't in any way bound to me; but I am bound to her, and I shall consider myself so until she marries another man. As for bad taste, it seems to me that if anybody is to be accused of that, it ought to be Wilfrid; because he knows how matters stand between her and me, and he might have had the honesty to tell me that he meant to cut me out if he could.'

Lady Elizabeth dissented wholly and entirely from that view, and stated her personal opinion as to the rights of seniority with much force and eloquence; but she was unable to convince the recalcitrant Hubert, who ended by jumping up and walking off to the other end of the room, where Ida, sitting apart, was listlessly turning over the leaves of an illustrated magazine.

Then the old lady thought she would try her hand upon Violet, and did not scruple, in so good a cause, to signal her away from Wilfrid, who at that moment was vainly endeavouring to entice her into the adjoining conservatory. The girl responded to her summons with suspicious alacrity; indeed the truth was that for some time past Violet had been doing her very best to catch Lady Elizabeth's eye. She was sharp enough to guess what Lady Elizabeth wanted to say to her, and she thought it extremely probable that she was about to have a disagreeable quarter of an hour; still nothing could be half so disagreeable as a quarter of an hour

of undisturbed conversation with her host, and when one is placed between the devil and the deep sea there is nothing for it but to take to the water and trust in Providence.

‘I have a crow to pluck with you,’ her ladyship began. ‘Sit down here and give an account of yourself. What do you mean, pray, by going in for kidnapping?’

‘I wasn’t aware that I had done anything of the kind,’ said Violet, clearing decks for action.

‘Oh, you needn’t glare so savagely at me, my dear; I fully admit that you have done no more than ninety-nine women out of a hundred would have done in your place; I dare say that at your age I should have behaved just as you have behaved. Only, you see, I happen to be rather more than double your age, and naturally I don’t like my little boys to be treated as though they were responsible beings. You may say that Hubert is no longer a child; but in reality he has hardly emerged from childhood yet, and I need scarcely point out to you that, even if

he had, he would not, and could not, be a marrying man. It would be kind and generous on your part to give him his quietus without further delay.'

'I don't know what you mean by giving him his quietus, Lady Elizabeth,' answered Violet resolutely; 'but I do know that I have said and done everything that it was in my power to say or do. So far as I am concerned, he is absolutely free. I certainly haven't kidnapped him, or tried to kidnap him, and I can't imagine what excuse you can think you have for bringing such an accusation against me.'

'Well, well,' said Lady Elizabeth; 'I suppose that no man, young or old, would go so far as to make an offer of marriage without having received some degree of encouragement; but we won't quarrel about that. All I want to beg of you is that you will take an opportunity of putting the poor boy out of his pain. Since you don't and can't intend to marry him, wouldn't it be rather more straightforward to tell him as much plainly?'

‘I was under the impression that I had told him so,’ answered Violet; ‘but I haven’t the least objection to confessing that I also told him I would never marry anybody else. Perhaps you think that I ought to marry somebody else? If so, all I can say is that I don’t see my duty in that light.’

The fact was that Lady Elizabeth had been guilty of a very clumsy mistake in making use of such a term as ‘kidnapping.’ She had only done so because she had been desirous of conveying to Violet’s mind the idea that Hubert was much too juvenile, as well as too poor, to put himself forward in the character of a serious suitor; but she had reckoned without her young friend’s pride and obstinacy.

‘Of course,’ she went on, ‘I am not so silly as to assert that it is your duty to marry anybody; but perhaps I may be allowed to wish that you should consent to marry a man who is not only devoted to you, but can offer you a little more than the bare necessities of life.’

‘I was sure, without your saying so,’ answered Violet, whose indignation was con-

siderably greater than she cared to express, 'that I had your best wishes ; but, after what I told you just now, you will understand that I might be idiotic enough to prefer bare necessities to luxuries. Please don't imagine, though, that I have the slightest wish to hang myself round the neck of an innocent child and drown him with me in the depths of indigence. If he is still under any misapprehension upon the point, I shall be delighted to remove it as soon as I can. More than that I don't see that you have any right to ask of me.'

Lady Elizabeth would fain have asked a little more ; but she was given no chance of so doing ; for Violet, having fired her shot, immediately rose and walked across the room to Hubert, whom she drew away from Ida for a moment in order to say to him hurriedly : 'Can you meet me in the Precincts to-morrow at about half-past four ? I want to speak to you rather particularly, and I can't speak with any comfort while half a dozen pairs of eyes are fixed upon me.'

Hubert assented joyously, little suspecting that this appointment had been made with a view to dealing him and his aspirations a final knock on the head ; and Violet said to herself, ' At least they shall not call me a kidnapper again ! One comfort is that I may throw off the mask now and be as rude as I please to this self-satisfied hypocrite.'

But whether, notwithstanding her wrath, there lurked in her mind some unconscious reluctance to burn her ships, or whether no fitting occasion for the performance of that rash act was afforded to her, certain it is that neither Wilfrid's self-satisfaction nor his hypocrisy received due chastisement from her that evening. Indeed, he was by no means ill-pleased with the success of his little entertainment, and he said as much when he was once more left alone with his mother, who only replied with a grunt.

Violet's mother was more explicit and more voluble during the long drive home ; but all she obtained in return for the many wise and kind things which she said was an emphatic



assurance that her daughter declined to be bullied. 'There really is no need for you and Lady Elizabeth to keep on impressing upon me what you want,' this independent young woman declared; 'you make that perfectly obvious to the meanest capacity. Whether I can oblige you, wholly or partially, is another question, and I certainly won't do either if I am to be harried like this.'

Ida, meanwhile, was saying to her husband, 'It is too infamous! Lady Elizabeth and Mrs. Stanton ought to be ashamed of themselves. I shouldn't blame them so much if they were frankly selfish and worldly; but it is simply sickening that they should pretend to be actuated by the highest motives. Luckily, Violet has a strong will of her own, and they are pretty sure to fail.'

'Well,' sighed John pensively, 'I hope so—yes; I should think they would. Still one can never tell. Perhaps one ought not to rely upon the probability of their failure.'



## CHAPTER XLIII

FOL EST QUI S'Y FIE !

IT was with a light heart and a light step that Hubert set out to keep his tryst with Violet on the ensuing afternoon. He had not, of course, been altogether free from disagreeable reflections during the night and morning ; he was a good deal incensed against Wilfrid, whose behaviour, he considered, had been neither brotherly nor very like that of a gentleman ; he was conscious that his own behaviour had not been above reproach, since there was some truth in his mother's assertion that a man whose hands are empty has no business to offer his heart to anybody ; he was aware also that a tolerably strong coalition had been formed to crush him. Still all these things were of comparatively slight consequence in the face of the fact that Violet had requested

him to meet her privately in the Precincts. That she had done so might surely be accepted as convincing evidence of her fidelity; and so long as she remained true to him, what did he care for the machinations of his and her enemies? Let them do their worst, and be hanged to them!

With this disrespectful and unfilial ejaculation he reached the appointed place a quarter of an hour before his time. The short winter day was closing in; it was already almost dark; through dim vistas of pointed arches there was a glimmer of white, where the snow lay upon the grass-plot, and every now and again an icy blast swept along the silent and deserted corridors. But perhaps he was too young to know how cold it was, and if he shivered at all, it was only at the dismal thought that Violet might have been prevented from keeping her appointment. The Cathedral chimes had boomed out the half-hour some minutes ago, and he was growing seriously uneasy, when to his great joy he caught sight of a small, fur-enveloped figure flitting rapidly towards him.

‘I was beginning to be afraid that you wouldn’t come,’ he cried, as he hastened to meet her. ‘How glad I am!—it is such a long, long time since I last saw you alone!’

‘Yes, it does seem rather a long time,’ Violet agreed—and he noticed at once that her voice had a dull, dispirited ring—‘but it isn’t really long. Nothing like as long as it will be before we meet in this way again. For the matter of that, I suppose we shall never meet in this way again, and we shouldn’t be here together now if I had a proper sense of what I owe to myself. However, for this once, I dare say it won’t signify much, unless somebody sees us.’

‘What is the matter?’ asked the young man in dismay; ‘have I done anything to offend you?’

‘No, not you; but your mother has. She told me that I had *kidnapped* you! No one shall have an excuse for saying such a thing as that to me twice. And the worst of it is that it’s almost true. I did refuse you; but I didn’t behave as if I meant you to

believe altogether in my refusal; and this is what has come of it. Well, I want you to understand now in sober earnest that——'

'Don't go on!' interrupted Hubert imploringly; 'don't say what you were going to say! I am very sorry that my mother spoke so impertinently to you; but, after all, I don't suppose she intended to be impertinent, and really, if you will think of it, you can afford to laugh at an accusation like that. Kidnapping indeed!—now, I appeal to you as a reasonable being: *am* I a kid?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' answered Violet, laughing a little; 'you'll allow that you are very young.'

'Not so very. Anyhow, I may claim to be old enough to know my own mind, and, whatever may happen, I shan't change it. Are you going to change yours just because an old lady, who has designs of her own, has chosen to make an uncivil speech to you?'

'That wouldn't be quite such an absurd reason as you seem to think; uncivil speeches mean a great deal more to a woman than they

do to a man. However, I didn't say that I meant to change my mind; it is only my conduct that must be changed. All along I have told you that I couldn't marry you or even engage myself to you; and of course, after that, I ought not to have spoken to you again, except when I couldn't help it, and when we happened to meet as ordinary acquaintances. From this day forth that will have to be our understanding. We won't cut each other, because that would be unnecessary and inconvenient; but we will ignore all that has passed between us up to now.'

'As if we could! Violet, do you remember saying that you would never marry any one but me?'

'Yes,' answered the girl, 'I remember; but it was a stupid thing to say, and I must take it back. Who knows what may come to pass years hence, when you yourself will very likely have married and forgotten me, and when I may feel the need of a home, as women always do after their youth is over? Besides, a promise of that sort would be to some extent

binding upon you too, and I don't wish you to be bound, however vaguely. Say what we will about it, your mother and my mother are in the right. Half measures are impracticable, and since we can't or won't marry upon the pittance that you have, we ought to accept facts honestly and part.'

'But it is possible, perfectly possible, to marry upon what you call my pittance,' said the young man eagerly, 'and I, for one, should be only too glad and thankful to do it.'

He proceeded to explain that, by exchanging into the infantry, he could at once increase the means at his disposal: added to which, he thought it by no means improbable that he might obtain a staff appointment after a time and rise to eminence in his profession, as hundreds of others had done. 'One can't expect to run no risk at all,' he concluded; 'nothing venture, nothing have.'

Violet, however, was not affected by these representations. 'I have thought it all out,' she said. 'I did, for a moment, feel almost inclined to run the risk that you speak of; but

I can't do it and I mustn't do it. If I didn't repent of having done it afterwards for my own sake, I should for yours. I might have the courage to defy my own people; but it would be another thing to defy yours, and to know that, in all the little petty troubles which would come upon us—and which would soon wear out your love for me—they would always blame me for having spoilt your life. You won't understand what I mean, and you will think I have only come here to say good-bye to you because I am too great a coward to face privations; but I can't help that. You must think what you please of me.'

Perhaps it was not altogether unpardonable on his part if his thoughts of her at that moment were neither just nor generous. 'There is one thing I should like to ask you, if you will allow me,' said he, in a constrained voice: 'I suppose you know that my mother hopes to get up a match between you and Wilfrid. Have you any thought of consenting to that?'

'I am not sure that I ought to answer you;



still, if you care to know, I don't mind saying that I have no thought of consenting to it—at present. I won't make any promise with regard to the future. He or another—what can it signify !'

She spoke in such quietly despairing accents, and her attitude, as she leant over the low stone wall beside which they had stationed themselves, expressed such complete dejection that his intelligence might surely have been equal to the comprehension of her feelings. But love is proverbially blind, and Hubert, it must be confessed, was hurt and angry, as well as bitterly disappointed.

'What do you mean by the future?' he asked rather gruffly. 'Next week is the future, and so is to-morrow.'

'Yes ; and this evening too. In another minute or two we shall have taken a fresh departure, you and I ; we shall be as free as if we had never met. The past is over—quite over and done with : that is what I want you to understand.'

'Very well,' answered Hubert, drawing

himself up ; ' if that is your decision, of course I can say no more. I suppose I must have been a great fool to imagine that you were speaking seriously when you told me that you were not fickle.'

' Perhaps ; but it seems that I was no fool when I told you that you would set me down as too great a coward to face privations. Anyhow, it wouldn't be worth our while to quarrel at the fag-end of the chapter, would it ? Let us shake hands, if only for form's sake. I don't wonder at your being angry with me now ; but I am very certain that a day will come when you will be thankful to me for having saved you from yourself. Good-bye.'

He held her hand for a moment and then dropped it without a word. Of course he was hurt, of course he was disenchanted, and almost equally of course he assumed that Wilfrid's wealth was a more desirable possession in her eyes than his own poor love. By his way of thinking she had gone as near to confessing that as it had been possible for her to do. So he let her go, and turned away

in a ferment of wrath against the entire female sex, which at least served to deaden the pain of his disappointment.

Violet, hurrying homewards through the darkness, was as fully aware of his sentiments as if he had expressed them. 'I have done it now,' she thought; 'I have made him despise me; and if he were to come into a large fortune to-morrow, it isn't with me that he would offer to share it! Well, I may flatter myself that I have been thoroughly successful. I wanted to convince him that romance was out of the question in our case, and never did I see anyone look more convinced. I wonder whether, years hence, it will occur to him that I might have been a little more disinterested than I appeared to be. Probably not; because years hence he won't care a button whether I was disinterested or not.'

Violet was not much given to seeking relief from sorrow in tears. She was accustomed to speak of herself as 'hard' and to pride herself upon being so, meaning thereby that she had a fine constitution, plenty of courage, and could

stand more physical fatigue than nine women out of ten. The same causes, it may be, enabled her to put a tolerably brave face upon mental afflictions, and if there was a lump in her throat and a mist before her eyes as she passed along the streets, these symptoms of distress had been vanquished by the time that she reached her mother's house and entered the drawing-room, where Mrs. Stanton and Wilfrid Chaine were entertaining one another, with a tea-table between them. She would certainly have gone straight up to her bedroom had she had any reason to anticipate an encounter with this unwelcome visitor ; but, flight being now impracticable, she seated herself by the fire and warmed her hands, while her mother reproached her for staying out so late.

‘I was really getting quite frightened,’ Mrs. Stanton declared, ‘and Mr. Chaine was most good-naturedly offering to go out and look for you when we heard you come in.’

‘I wish he had carried out his good-natured intention!’ thought Violet to herself. ‘It is extremely unlikely that he would have found

me, and by the time that he returned to announce that he had failed, I should have been dressing for dinner.' However, she said aloud that she would have been sorry to give Mr. Chaine such unnecessary trouble.

'It wouldn't have been the first time,' Wilfrid remarked, with a smile. 'I am in a perpetual state of looking out for you in St. Albyn's; but, somehow or other, I never have the good luck to discover you.'

Violet only replied by a surprised stare; but Mrs. Stanton said cheerfully: 'Well, you have discovered her at last, you see.'

Perhaps this playful remark was not in the best possible taste; but some allowance may well be made for an unfortunate lady who had had to apologise for her daughter's absence on many previous occasions, and who had found it rather exhausting work to keep up a flow of genial conversation for the benefit of her daughter's foiled admirer.

However, it was certainly a little too bad of her to start up, almost immediately afterwards, and hurry out of the room, murmuring some-

thing about having forgotten to give any orders to the cook. Nobody could be supposed to have orders to give to the cook at that advanced hour, nor was either of the persons whom Mrs. Stanton left behind her taken in for an instant by her preposterous pretext. One of them threw an agonised glance of protest and entreaty (which naturally met with no response) after the good lady's retreating form, and then sank back in her chair, prepared for the worst. After all, it was not a matter of any great consequence now ; Wilfrid could not be prevented from saying what he had to say some time or other, and the sooner his say was said and done with the better, perhaps.

Such was apparently his own opinion, for he wasted no time about taking advantage of the opportunity for which he had waited so long in vain. Almost before Violet had realised that he had made a start, he was finishing. He may have thought that he had finished rather cleverly ; his style of so doing was, at all events, resolute and workmanlike, and as he awaited his lady-love's reply he appeared

to her to have very much the air of one who is prepared to accept, without unseemly elation, the crown of victory which is his due.

This, of course, rendered it all the easier and the less distressing to inform him that he had made a little mistake. Violet thanked him for the honour which he proposed to confer upon her and which he was no doubt justified in considering a high one, but explained that her ambition did not set in the direction indicated. As he must be aware, there was no accounting for tastes and ambitions, and hers happened to be of a humble order.

At first he did not in the least understand her; he thought she had been piqued by his compulsory neglect of her during the canvassing time, and he assured her with great warmth and earnestness that he had been no more to blame for that neglect than he had been for his inability to declare his sentiments immediately after his election. But by degrees the painful conviction forced itself upon him that she not only did not love him but

had not the slightest faith in his love for her. Well, there at any rate she was wrong ; for he loved her as ardently as it was in his power to love any human being ; and, aided by the inherent force and eloquence of truth, he did at length manage to persuade her that he was sincere, notwithstanding her reluctance to allow him credit for any good quality. Her rejoinder was therefore couched in somewhat gentler accents than she had hitherto employed.

‘I suppose you really do care for me,’ she said—‘indeed there couldn’t be any reason for your asking me to marry you unless you did—but I don’t quite see why you should. I think you must know that, if I were to accept you—which I can’t and won’t—it wouldn’t be because I cared for you.’

He was not, in truth, wholly ignorant of that ; yet to hear the fact so simply and unequivocally stated gave him a sharp twinge about the region of the heart. It was not without an effort that he brought himself to speak of Hubert and confessed that he had



hoped that 'foolish affair' was a thing of the past.

'Oh, that is a thing of the past,' answered Violet composedly. 'Foolish as I am, I am not foolish enough to attempt impossibilities. Only, you know, there are various kinds of impossibilities, and nothing is more certain than that for some time to come I shall not dream of marrying anybody.'

'Because of him, do you mean?'

'Because of this, that, or the other: what do my motives signify to you so long as you realise that they are strong enough to compel me to decline your offer finally?'

But this was just what Wilfrid did not realise. His passions were, in a certain sense, powerful, and he had never been accustomed to place any curb upon them save the curb of self-interest. Whetted by opposition, his passion for Violet had become too intense to be laid aside at her bidding; he told her so with an emphasis and emotion which astonished and almost touched her.

'I am more patient and more determined

than you imagine,' he concluded; 'you can't prevent me from hoping, though you may think now that I have no sort of excuse for hope. Well, time will show! One thing you may take my word for: if you make me wait as long as Jacob waited for Rachel, I will wait and never utter a word of complaint.'

This was only a flight of rhetoric, for he neither meant nor expected to wait for quite so long a period as that which to Jacob 'seemed but a few days'; still he was very much in earnest and not so very much discouraged as perhaps he ought to have been. He left the house saying to himself that there is a vast difference between check and check-mate: the fact was that he held women in general too cheap to ascribe much constancy or consistency even to the woman whom he loved.

As he walked down the street he met two persons of whom he took no notice; but one of them noticed and recognised him. As soon as he had passed out of hearing she turned to her companion and said, in apparent continuation of an unfinished speech:

‘So there it is, Mr. Fletcher; I don’t see my way to doing as you wish, and we had better say no more about it.’

‘Why, Jessie,’ exclaimed the fat little man who was ambling along by her side, ‘what’s come over you? I thought just now you was going to say Yes, and be done with it.’

‘Did you?’ returned Mrs. Viccars, with a short laugh. ‘Well, so did I, maybe; for you’re a decent sort of man in your way, and a home is a home. But I’ve changed my mind, you see; I often do.’

‘Now, look here, Jessie,’ remonstrated Mr. Fletcher, the highly respectable and esteemed poulterer of St. Albyn’s, ‘this ain’t no sort of way to treat me. I’ve beyaved fair and square to you; I ain’t asked no questions, nor yet I don’t mean to ask none; I’ve——’

‘Yes, I know,’ interrupted Mrs. Viccars; ‘you have been as accommodating as any man could be, and so long as the money is all right, you don’t mind who provides it. But unfortunately I have found out all of a sudden

that I do mind. I'm not going to take that money, and it stands to reason that you won't take me without it.'

Mr. Fletcher wagged his head solemnly. 'I didn't ought to do such a thing, my dear,' he answered; 'and, come to my time of life, a man who was to do such a thing would be no better than a downright hass. But this I do say and will say—though, mind you, I ain't asking no questions—if a gentleman has deceived or wronged a young girl, why he's bound in what I call equity, if he ain't bound in law, to make pecooniary compensation. That's my view.'

'Quite so, Mr. Fletcher; but perhaps, by trying very hard, you might manage to understand that there are some gentlemen whom one would rather be injured than supported by.'

The worthy poulterer professed his utter inability to comprehend any such condition of mind; and so the pair passed on, continuing their argument in the chilly darkness.

If Wilfrid could have overheard it he might

with some reason have cursed his luck; for had he emerged from Mrs. Stanton's house two minutes later it is quite upon the cards that he would have had no further trouble with Jessie Viccars.





## CHAPTER XLIV

### JOHN HEARS TOO MUCH AND NOT ENOUGH

IT so chanced that on that same inclement afternoon the elder, as well as the two younger, of the Chainé brothers was in St. Albyn's. John was not much given to frequenting the cathedral city, for he was painfully conscious of being still regarded there with a certain doubt and distrust, as one who, if he had committed no actual crime, had at all events run away and shammed dead in order to avoid arrest ; but, since he was under the impression that Ida did not like him to remain indoors all day, and since he could think of no other pretext for relieving her of his presence, he mentioned at luncheon that he had one or two shops to go to and asked whether she had any objection to his riding the cob. It was his own cob, which had remained in the stables at

the White House throughout his absence and which could hardly be said to have thereby become Ida's property ; but he had a way—a very exasperating way, it must be owned—of talking as if everything about the place belonged to her now.

‘I have no objection to your riding your cob, or even to your putting on your hat and your coat and doing your shopping,’ answered Ida, who had ceased to protest against this habit of his, though she had not ceased to be enraged by it. ‘If any objection is raised, I should think it might be by the cob ; for the roads must be as slippery as glass.’

It is not unlikely that the cob did object to being taken out of his warm stable in such weather ; but John did not push humility to the point of consulting his wishes, and, as he had been roughed, he carried his master without mishap, though only at a foot's pace, along highways and byways which amply justified Ida's description of them. Upon the whole, the horse had a better time of it than the rider, for the former was made pretty

comfortable at the White Hart, whereas the latter was fain to kill time by wandering about the streets, and was, moreover, vexed by carking worries and anxieties from which the equine mind may be assumed to be free.

John's few purchases were soon made ; after which it was not particularly good fun to moon up and down the pavements of the High Street, which had been swept in the morning and were now coated with half-congealed snow. Still even that melancholy and solitary method of whiling away the twilight hours was a shade preferable to being accosted by Mrs. Pickersgill, who bounced suddenly out of a shop and, by dint of that superior strength of will which is said to be all-powerful on such occasions, forced her unwilling acquaintance to accompany her, as she trotted towards her home in the Precincts. Mrs. Pickersgill, of course, had good reasons for thus thrusting her society upon a gentleman who did not so much as pretend to be ambitious of enjoying it, and these she at once made abundantly evident to him.



‘Do tell me,’ she began—‘I know it is an indiscreet question, but I have always taken such an interest in poor little Violet Stanton that I hope you will excuse my asking—is what people are saying about her and your brother Wilfrid true? Are they really engaged?’

‘If they are, I haven’t heard of it,’ answered John rather gruffly. ‘Most likely people have been misinformed. As a general rule, it is safe to assume that what people say is not true.’

‘My dear Mr. Chaine, what a shockingly cynical speech! So they are *not* engaged, then?—not yet, at any rate. Well, no doubt it would be a good match for her, and one would be glad to think that she was so well provided for, poor child! Still, as I said to Mrs. Tyler just now, I can hardly believe that she would throw over the poor brother for the rich one with such precipitation; it would look almost too selfish and calculating, wouldn’t it? I dare say you have heard that there has been a very pronounced flirtation, to call it nothing more, between her and your soldier brother?’

‘I am not much in the way of hearing garrison or clerical gossip,’ answered John. ‘Probably spiteful and false things are said about us all ; it wouldn’t be worth any sensible man’s while to waste a second thought upon them.’

Mrs. Pickersgill made a mental note of this very rude speech, and resolved to pay the speaker out for it at some future time. For the moment, she contented herself with remarking that she, personally, always discountenanced gossip, that she knew little or nothing of the garrison and that any one who had mixed at all in clerical circles must be aware that, whatever might be the failings of the clergy, spite was not one of them.

‘Nevertheless,’ she added, ‘if people act in such a way as to attract the notice and—and surprise of those about them, they must not expect to escape criticism, and I can’t agree with you, Mr. Chaine, that it is not worth a sensible man’s while to contradict—that is, if he can—rumours which affect his reputation.’

‘I don’t see how any man’s reputation can

be affected by a rumour of his having flirted with some young lady, or even of his being engaged to be married to her,' said John.

'Oh, well, no; perhaps not. To tell you the truth, I was thinking just then of a more unpleasant rumour. Really, Mr. Chaine, if you will believe me, I had no intention of saying this to you; but as we are alone, and as I may never have such another opportunity, I can't help suggesting to you that it would be a good thing if your brother Wilfrid would give a rather more coherent and definite account than he has done as yet of what happened on that dreadful night which has brought such undeserved—I am sure quite undeserved—suffering upon you and Mrs. Chaine. I do feel that he ought not to allow it to be said or hinted that that man Barton's confession was trumped up and paid for by him. Please forgive my alluding to so painful a subject; nothing but a sense of duty would ever have induced me to do so.'

'I forgive you,' answered John shortly. 'I may add that I am certain Wilfrid would

never have permitted the lie you speak of to be uttered or insinuated in his presence. Good night.'

He raised his hat, wheeled round and walked away, unceremoniously ignoring Mrs. Pickersgill's rejoinder, of which, however, he could not help hearing the first words.

'But that is just what he has done!' the amiable lady cried. 'That is why I have taken the liberty——'

A gust of wind swept away the conclusion of her sentence, which, to be sure, could easily be dispensed with. Was it possible, John wondered, as he strode away with bent head, that Wilfrid had tacitly acquiesced in such a calumny? Could he have had the unspeakable meanness to do so? Or could it be that he had acquiesced, not through any meanness, unspeakable or otherwise, but simply by reason of sheer inability to deny the truth? To the first two questions John could not find as ready a reply as he would have wished; but the last he answered promptly and decisively in the negative. It was no doubt conceivable

that a dying man might be induced to brand himself falsely as a murderer by promises of subsequent assistance to his wife and family ; but it was so unlikely as to be almost inconceivable that Wilfrid would have incurred risk, trouble and expense for the sake of whitewashing an elder brother whom, at the time, he had firmly believed to be dead and buried. Moreover, the murder had unquestionably been committed by Barton.

‘It certainly wasn’t committed by me,’ thought John ; ‘the amazing thing is that I should ever have imagined that it was !’

In reality this was not so very amazing ; for, often as he had tried to recall the events of that momentous night, they had always remained confused and blurred in his memory. Some details, however, had of late recurred to him, and these had put thoughts into his head respecting Wilfrid upon which he had not cared to dwell. He did not care to dwell upon them now ; he wished, if he could, to turn his back upon the miserable past ; he did not wish to demand explanations. Only he

began to feel that there was at least one point as to which he would have to demand them.

Oddly enough, a fragment of conversation which he chanced to overhear, while he was moodily making his way towards the White Hart stables, bore reference to this point. A burly tradesman was standing in his doorway, talking to a friend, who, as John passed, was saying :

‘ Well, that’s the story that’s been put about. Mould he keeps uncommon close ; but he’s got Jessie down with him again, and I did hear as she was seen speaking to Squire Chaine in the street. Come to put this and that together, it looks queer—that’s *my* opinion.’

‘ Ah, and I shouldn’t wonder if she was to make him *feel* queer afore she’s done with him,’ observed the other. ‘ She was always a self-willed baggage, was that Jessie Mould ; though I don’t say but what she may have been treated worse nor she deserved.’

John walked on, got his horse out of the stable, mounted and set forth to pick his way home through the darkness. The case against

Wilfrid, if indeed there could be said to be a case against him, had not been altered or strengthened by the chatter of two idle citizens; still the fact that such chatter was taking place showed that the Jessie Viccars episode was not to be reckoned among absolute by-gones. 'I expect I shall have to say something about it to him,' muttered John with a sigh.

It was at this appropriate juncture that an equestrian who, less prudent than he, had trotted from St. Albyn's, notwithstanding the dangerous condition of the roads, overtook him, drew rein and exclaimed cheerfully: 'I thought it must be John! Well, John, how are you? And why are you roaming about in the dark, like an owl, if one may ask?'

'I had to go into the town to buy some things,' answered the elder brother. 'I was just thinking about you, Wilfrid; there is a question which I haven't asked you yet, because it didn't seem to be necessary; but I should rather like to put it to you now. You won't have forgotten that on the night when

poor Fraser was killed I had a certain letter in my pocket? What became of that letter? It wasn't in my pocket the next morning.'

'Do you mean to say,' returned Wilfrid, without an instant's hesitation, 'that you don't remember handing the thing over to me and telling me to burn it?'

'No,' answered John slowly; 'I don't remember doing that. When did I do so?'

'Why, in the dining-room, after dinner, of course. To the best of my recollection we discussed the subject in all its bearings.'

'What!—when Fraser was with us?'

'As if we should have been likely to discuss it before him! No, my dear fellow; it was when I returned to the house with you after we had parted with him, and of course before I made that terrible discovery which drove all other thoughts out of our minds. You may not have had all your wits about you at the time; but you certainly talked as if you had.'

The two brothers rode on side by side for nearly a hundred yards before John said, with



a sort of impatient hopelessness: 'I don't know—I can recall nothing about it. It may have been as you say. Anyhow, I am not in a position to give you the—to contradict you. But, since my memory is such a complete blank, will you tell me now how you managed to explain away the allegations which that woman Jessie Viccars made in her letter?'

'*Infandum jubes renovare dolorem!*' returned Wilfrid, laughing. 'Must I really go through the whole of that very commonplace but very unpalatable old story again? I don't quite see why I should, considering that any man of average intelligence might construct it for himself out of the materials which were once in your possession. It is such an old story! The woman tempted me; then she tried to blackmail me. She succeeded in the first attempt; she failed in the second—*voilà!* Moreover, with the highest possible respect for you, my dear John, the indiscretions of my youth are no particular business of yours.'

'Not now, perhaps; it makes very little

difference to me now whether you tried to injure me with my father, as she said you did, or not, and she may have been a liar as well as a worthless woman. That is quite possible, although there can't be any doubt as to your having promised to marry her. But, to speak plainly, I am not sure that you have broken with Jessie Viccars yet, and I am not sure that I oughtn't, in justice both to Miss Stanton and to Hubert, to tell what I know.'

Perhaps it was just as well that the darkness prevented John from seeing his brother's face, which at that moment wore a singularly ugly expression. But it was with perfect calmness and suavity that the latter rejoined, after a brief pause :

'Do you know, John, I think it would be rather ill-advised on your part to quarrel with me? And, as it is my humble desire to emulate your frankness, I will go so far as to tell you that, if you interfere between me and Miss Stanton, we shall quarrel. I may add that when I quarrel, I quarrel with a will. Hubert and I have not quarrelled; Miss

Stanton may reject me and take him if she chooses ; only I venture to doubt whether that will be her choice. For the rest, I owe you no account of my actions, as regards Jessie Viccars or anybody else, and I must decline to give you any such account. By all means tell Miss Stanton what you know, or think you know ; but, as I said before, if you do, we shall fall out. The plain English of the matter is that your wife hates me and would be glad to serve me an ill turn. So be it ! For your own sake, however, I should recommend you not to let her make a cat's-paw of you ; because, after all, the game upon which she is engaged admits of two players. Personally, I am discreet and reticent ; she might do worse than to follow my example. Ponder these sayings, John ; they are uttered for your good. And bear in mind that you can't prove a single word of the improbable history that you propose to relate.'

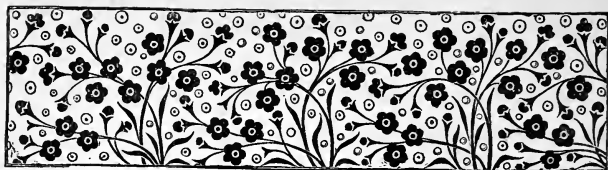
He touched his horse with his heel and cantered on ahead, leaving John not less troubled and perplexed than he had been at

the beginning of their colloquy. That Wilfrid was a traitor he could scarcely doubt ; that it would ever be in his power to prove him a traitor he did doubt very much indeed. And then, for his own part, he did not relish the character of a tale - bearer. What, indeed, did this scandal amount to ? Was it not, as Wilfrid himself had said, a most commonplace story ?—the sort of story which, *mutato nomine*, might be narrated about a dozen respectable and respected persons. Would Miss Stanton thank him, or have any reason to thank him, for thrusting upon her notice episodes of a nature which it is customary to ignore ? Would she be one whit more likely to marry Hubert because it had been insinuated to her that Wilfrid's conduct had not always been absolutely immaculate ?

Yet, for all these specious reasonings, John knew very well in his heart that the man who had despoiled him of his inheritance was a scoundrel, and he was also dimly aware that he himself was a coward for not declaring open war upon him. Had he pushed self-

examination farther than he felt any inclination to do, he might have discovered (though doubtless the discovery would have caused him some surprise) that what had daunted him more than anything else had been Wilfrid's sinister hint that he could, if he chose, make things uncomfortable for Ida. Wilfrid apparently knew something. Well, then, in God's name, let him keep his knowledge to himself! 'It is too late for me to be jealous at this time of day,' thought poor John, with a quick sigh, in which there was at least as much of remorse as there was of rebellion against destiny.





## CHAPTER XLV

### IDA'S ALLY

THE nature of man is so composite and incongruous that there is sometimes a curious affinity—at least as regards immediate results—between poltroonery and chivalry ; and it is quite possible that both of these opposing influences may have been at work upon John Chaine when he resolved that he would say nothing to his wife that evening about Wilfrid and the ill-used Jessie Viccars. He did, however, during a pause after dinner, mention, with a rather forced laugh, that he had been buttonholed in St. Albyn's by Mrs. Pickersgill, and that she had been so considerate as to inform him of current reports which were not less flattering to his brother than they were to himself.

‘ What the woman's object can have been in

telling such a foolish falsehood it is difficult to understand,' he said.

'Her object,' answered Ida, 'was what it generally is—to annoy the person to whom she was speaking. It isn't always necessary to tell a falsehood in order to do that.'

'But surely *you* don't believe that what she said was true!' cried John uneasily.

'As I was with Barton when he was dying, and as it was to me that his confession was made, I naturally don't believe that it was bought and paid for,' answered Ida. 'Besides which, I am as certain as I am of my own existence that Wilfrid would never have expended a penny for the sake of proving your innocence. I think it perfectly possible, though, that he may have allowed people to give him credit for having spent money in that way.'

'Well, perhaps he couldn't prevent people from forming their own conclusions; it is only fair to admit that my flight from the country was a rather hard thing to explain away. Besides, as I told you before, I don't really care what anybody, except you, believes about it.'

Ida started up abruptly and moved towards the door. She was so provoked with the man that she thought she had better not trust herself to speak ; yet, when she reached the threshold, she could not resist turning round to fire a parting shot.

‘If this were magnanimity on your part,’ said she, ‘I might try to admire you ; but both your face and your voice tell me that it is nothing of the sort. You know as well as I do that your brother is a miscreant who ought to be unmasked, or at least ought to be fought ; you spare him, not because you love him, but simply and solely because you are afraid of him. Why you should be afraid of him I cannot conceive ; all I know is that *I* am not afraid of him, and that I will fight him the very first time I get the chance.’

The desired opportunity, little as she supposed it, was about to be granted to her. Neither that evening nor at breakfast on the following morning did she impart to her husband any of the angry and revengeful thoughts with which her mind was filled ; but after she



had seen John leave the house and plod away down the snow-covered drive, she set herself to consider seriously how she might best bring Wilfrid to book. He deserved to be brought to book; it was intolerable that he should be permitted to have everything his own way by reason of the unmanly supineness of his victim; even if he could not be convicted—as probably he could not—of all the iniquities which she was inclined to lay to his charge, he might surely be compelled to make some sort of public declaration to the effect that there had been nothing in the shape of collusion between him and Barton. She had almost decided to walk up to the Court and beard the villain in his den when the butler came in to announce that ‘a person by the name of Mrs. Viccars’ had called and wished to speak to her.

‘And I was to say, if you please, ma’am, that her business was most particular,’ he added.

‘Somebody with testimonials and a subscription list, I suppose,’ muttered Ida, to

whom, as to the rest of us, such visits were a matter of frequent and unwelcome experience. 'Well, ask her to come in.'

Presently Jessie Viccars entered, looking nervous but determined, and, after a momentary hesitation on Ida's part, was invited to seat herself. She did not, however, take advantage of this proffered civility, but remained standing while, in a rapid speech which had evidently been learnt by heart, she explained her motives for intruding upon Mrs. Chaine.

Plain as Jessie's statement was, Ida did not at first grasp the full significance of it, nor was she much prepossessed in her visitor's favour. Very likely the woman was speaking the truth when she asserted that she had been cruelly wronged by Wilfrid, though it was a good deal less likely that he had ever promised to marry her; her desire to prevent him from marrying Violet Stanton was intelligible, if somewhat visionary, while her assumption that she might count upon the cordial co-operation of Mr. Wilfrid Chaine's sister-in-law seemed to border upon impertinence. In

short, with every willingness to believe the worst of Wilfrid, Ida felt the usual feminine inability to sympathise with another woman whose reputation has been tarnished ; nor did it appear to her that the blazoning abroad of this particular woman's wrongs would have any great chance of producing the hoped-for effect.

'I suppose,' she began rather coldly, 'you are the person who—there was an interruption at one of Mr. Wilfrid Chaine's meetings before the election which, I dare say, referred to you. Yours is a sad story ; but—I am afraid it is not in my power to give you any help.'

A pink spot appeared upon each of Jessie's cheek-bones, and there was a flash in her dark eyes, as she replied : 'I don't think you quite understand me, ma'am. Nobody can help me, and I shouldn't think of asking for anybody's help ; all I want is to save others from suffering as I have suffered. Maybe I shouldn't be sorry either to see justice done to a man who has spoilt my life for me ; but that's neither here nor there. What I should like to make you realise, if I could, is that that man is bad

all through and all over. That's why I came to you. I don't suppose Miss Stanton would listen to me, and I'm pretty sure that Mr. John wouldn't, because he knows already all there is to know.'

She went on to relate how she had handed over the only documentary evidence in her possession to John, and how, according to Wilfrid's account, he had contemptuously destroyed it. 'I don't more than half believe that he did destroy it,' she added; 'but I've no more doubt that it was destroyed than I have that he was scared into running away so that his father might cut him out of the property.'

At this point Ida's interest in her informant became more keen, and every word that Jessie said lent confirmation to the suspicions which she had entertained all along. The marvellous, the inexplicable thing was that her husband, knowing what he had known, had refrained from bringing any accusation against his supplanter. But Jessie was of opinion that his silence was not so very inexplicable.

'That man can tell lies with such an

innocent face that it would take a cleverer gentleman than poor Mr. John to find him out,' she declared. 'He deceived me after you would have thought that it wasn't possible for him to deceive anybody, and I don't say that he couldn't deceive me even now, if he thought it worth while. I know he is frightened of me, though, because I know he has offered my father a good round sum of money to marry me to an honest tradesman, whom I should like well enough to marry, being so lonely and so unprovided for. But I won't marry, and I won't take the money. I have come here, instead, to tell you what I've told you; and now it is for you, ma'am, to do the rest.'

'I hardly see what I can do,' answered Ida despondently. 'Of course I can repeat your story to everybody who will listen to me; but it doesn't follow that I shall be believed, or that, even if I am believed, Mr. Wilfrid will be thought much the worse of for it. You must be aware that stories of that kind are not uncommon, and that it is invariably the

woman, not the man, who is condemned when they are made public. By your own account, he has made you a fairly liberal allowance and is ready to give you a handsome sum on your marriage. That may not be justice; but it is what the majority of respectable people call justice.'

'You forget, ma'am,' returned Jessie, with a smile, 'that he has done something far worse than ruining the daughter of a market-gardener. Mr. John, who don't know how to tell a lie, will have to admit, if he is put to it, that I sent him a letter in which his brother didn't only promise to marry me, but hinted that the reason why he couldn't marry me at once was that he saw a prospect of getting old Mr. Chaine to leave the property to him. There you have his motive for ridding himself of the natural heir by fair means or foul; and there, depend upon it, you will find his motive for submitting to your terms when you threaten him with exposure. I don't know what your terms will be; I know what mine are: he shall never marry. And to these terms he

will agree ; because he cares for nobody as he cares for himself, and he can't afford to be disgraced — no ; nor even to be unpopular.'

'Why should you not go and dictate terms to him yourself, then ?'

'For the reason that I daren't trust myself within reach of his tongue. I told him once that it was possible to love and hate at one and the same time, and that is the truth. He has tried being rough with me ; if he were frightened, he might try being gentle with me, and then I couldn't answer for myself. I came here because I wanted to put it out of my power to let him off. I don't think you will let him off, ma'am.'

Certainly Ida was conscious of no inclination to be guilty of that criminal weakness. Her heart was softened towards the unfortunate woman who, as she could not but admit, was actuated by incentives somewhat less ignoble than those of personal comfort or aggrandisement, and she endeavoured to express something of the compassion and

sympathy to which she had been moved. Jessie, however, neither wished to be pitied nor felt herself capable of being consoled.

‘I’ve done what I warned him I would do,’ were her parting words; ‘I don’t expect to be thanked, nor I don’t pretend that I’ve done it for your sake, ma’am. I may have done it a little bit for Miss Stanton’s sake, though I wouldn’t swear to that either.’

Hardly had Mrs. Viccars left the house before Ida was on her way to Chainé Court. It might perhaps have been more prudent to wait awhile, to collect her ideas, to decide precisely what she intended to do and what circumstances enabled her to do; but the truth was that she was too angry and excited for deliberation. She saw that there would be difficulty in proving what she was firmly convinced of—namely, that Wilfrid had intentionally and for his own purposes allowed his brother to be the victim of false and shameful aspersions—but she thought that she could at least put a stop to his designs upon Violet Stanton, of whose constancy to Hubert she



no longer felt as certain as she would have wished to be.

‘I believe her ladyship is at home, ma’am,’ was the butler’s surprised and deferentially reproving answer to the inquiry that she made on arriving at her destination.

But Ida said that she did not want to see Lady Elizabeth. Her business was with Mr. Chaine, and if he was out, she would wait in his study until he returned.

The result of this determined attitude on her part was that she was presently ushered into the spacious and comfortably furnished room where Wilfrid was seated, with a pile of letters and papers on the writing-table before him, and that her adversary rose and greeted her after the time-honoured fashion in vogue amongst prize-fighters. He knew very well that she had come to fight him; but not the less on that account was his pressure of her hand fraternal and affectionate, nor did he neglect to push an easy chair up to the fire-side for her.

‘How courageous of you to face this bitter

weather !' he exclaimed. 'I really think you must have had some special reason for braving the elements.'

'I am not afraid of a little cold,' answered Ida ; 'but, as you may imagine, I shouldn't have forced myself upon you at this hour of the day unless I had had a special reason for doing so. Will you allow me to speak plainly and unceremoniously ? It will be a saving of your time and mine if I may.'

'It is always foolish and useless to waste time,' answered Wilfrid urbanely. 'Pray, consider yourself released from all the trammels of ceremony.'

'Then,' said Ida, 'I will begin by telling you something that John told me last night. He was in St. Albyn's yesterday, and he met Mrs. Pickersgill, who, in the kindness of her heart, repeated the gossip of the place to him. According to her, people are saying that my husband was really the murderer of Mr. Fraser, that Barton was bribed by you to perjure himself on his deathbed, and that you have not contradicted this report,

although it has been mentioned in your presence.'

'I am not aware,' answered Wilfrid, 'that any statement so circumstantial as that has ever been made in my presence; if it had been, I should of course have corrected it. Once or twice I have heard innuendoes to the effect that John's innocence has not been absolutely proved; and of these I have taken no notice, for the simple reason that I cannot now, any more than I could at the time of the inquest, swear to it positively. If you will be advised by me, you will follow my example, and leave time to do its work. Some people, you know, still believe that the son of Louis XVI. grew up and had a family, while others maintain that Mary Stuart had no hand in the murder of Darnley. It is idle to argue questions as to which there must always exist the possibility of a doubt. May I ask whether that was the only charge that John had to bring against me?'

He put this query because he was quite sure, by the expression of Ida's face, that

there was more to come, and her rejoinder did not take him by surprise, though it assumed a form which he had scarcely anticipated.

‘John brings no charge against you,’ she replied drily; ‘it is I who accuse you of infamous cruelty and duplicity—I and another. When I tell you that Mrs. Viccars has been with me this morning, and that she has related to me the whole history of your dealings with her, including the fact of her having forwarded a letter of yours to John, of which you robbed him—for I haven’t the slightest doubt that you did rob him of it—you will understand what I mean.’

‘It is singular,’ remarked Wilfrid, ‘that John himself should have spoken to me yesterday about that letter. Perhaps he mentioned to you that he had spoken to me upon the subject? No? Well, he did so, and I don’t deny that it was a foolish, to some extent even a compromising letter, and that I was glad to have his permission to put it in the fire. As for my having

robbed him of it, you must excuse my declining to refute so absurd an accusation. I am afraid I must also ask you to excuse me if I decline to discuss poor Jessie Viccars and her wrongs, real or supposed, with you. Few men can boast of having escaped all the follies and sins of youth, and few escape paying for them. As a matter of fact, I have paid a tolerably long price for mine, and I confess that I am not inclined to admit any right on your part to catechise me about them.'

'I do not wish to catechise you,' returned Ida; 'I merely wish to caution you that, if Mrs. Viccars's story is made public—as it certainly will be, except upon one condition—your conduct on the night of Mr. Fraser's murder will be more easily accounted for in the eyes of most people than it has been hitherto. Everybody knows already that you had one obvious motive for advising John to run away; when it is known that you had another, and perhaps an even more powerful one, you will hardly, I should think, contrive

to stave off the general execration that you deserve. It is as certain as anything can be that, if your father had seen the letter which you assert that John allowed you to burn, he would never have made you his heir.'

'Dear me!' said Wilfrid. 'I suppose, then, that I am to take this as a formal declaration of hostilities from you and your ally? Well, I need scarcely tell you that I recognised you before this—much to my regret—as being an enemy of mine; but I am really sorry that your rancour against me should have led you into such doubtful company. Permit me, as a matter of harmless curiosity, to inquire what is the condition upon which you and your friend are prepared to refrain from inflicting all these terrible pains and penalties upon me?'

'You have probably guessed it,' answered Ida: 'the condition is that you shall renounce all attempt and pretension to marry Violet Stanton. Mrs. Viccars, I believe, is deter-

mined to prevent your marrying anybody ; but that is a question between her and you with which I have nothing to do. The only stipulation that I have to make—and, under the circumstances, it is a tolerably modest one—is that you will not offer a share of your successful robbery to Violet.'

'What a pity it is that such unparalleled modesty should go unrewarded ! There is no help for it, however ; you have chosen to challenge me, and I can't see any other course open to me, meek as my nature is, than to humbly pick up the glove. I need not tell you that I am fully sensible of your power to inflict a certain amount of annoyance upon me ; but as for permitting you or your coadjutor to dictate to me in the matter of my possible marriage with any given individual, I should indeed be a lunatic if I were to consent to anything of that sort. Such threats naturally make me look to my own weapons, which, notwithstanding my reluctance to use them, seem to me quite as formidable as yours. Have you, I wonder,

mentioned to John the name of our young friend Mr. Arthur Mayne? Ah, I see that you haven't. Well, I applaud your discretion, and I agree with you that it is far better and wiser to spare a jealous man the pangs of a not unreasonable jealousy. Still you will understand that I can't afford to show forbearance to those who wantonly attack me, and if you make things uncomfortable for me, I fear that I shall be compelled in self-defence to retaliate to the best of my poor ability.'

Ida rose at once, drawing herself up to her full height. 'You are a miserable coward,' said she. 'I have done nothing that I am ashamed of; but even if I had, I would not stoop to make a bargain with you. Say the worst that you can of me, and I, on my side, will tell all that I know and can prove about you. It is to be war between us, then?'

Wilfrid shrugged his shoulders. 'So you seem to have decided,' he replied. 'I think you are making a mistake; because, as you



will find, you will not be able to prove your allegations, and the shame of them will probably recoil upon your own head. Moreover, I am afraid you will have a bad time of it with your husband, who, as you ought to know, is not the most reasonable or philosophical of men. As for me, all I can say is that it has always been my endeavour to follow the advice of Polonius with regard to quarrels; and I think I may venture to add that it isn't very prudent to quarrel with me.'

'Prudent or imprudent, it is what I mean to do,' returned Ida resolutely. 'If you were as clever as you think yourself, you would realise that you can't make me much more miserable than I am, whereas I can, and I will, save Violet Stanton from the misery of becoming your wife.'

Thus she made a fairly impressive exit; and, although she was conscious of having failed in the object of her mission, her failure was not quite so complete as she imagined; for she left behind her an antagonist who was very much afraid that his tactics also had

hardly achieved the result that he had anticipated from them.

‘This comes of dealing with women as though they possessed any reasoning powers at all!’ he muttered, as he returned to his correspondence.





## CHAPTER XLVI

### JOHN AND IDA ARE ENLIGHTENED

IDA'S assertion that she was not ashamed of anything that she had done was both conscientious and truthful; but, after she had turned her back upon Chainé Court, she was unable to tell herself that she was equally free from shame as regarded something which she had left undone. She ought, perhaps, to have told her husband that, believing him to be dead, she had engaged herself to marry another man. She was not quite sure that it had been her duty to do so, or that any real blame attached to her for having kept so painful a secret; still there was no denying that the confession which she would now have to make would come with a worse grace from her than if it had been made voluntarily, and that she would appear to have been deceitful as well

as, in a certain sense, unfaithful. She was, in short, going to be found out; and that is an experience which is apt to make the best of us feel ashamed, however persuaded we may be of the integrity of our conscience and motives.

Of course she must tell John the whole story of her intimacy with and love for Arthur Mayne. If she did not do so, Wilfrid would, and Wilfrid might be relied upon to make the case against her as bad as misrepresentation and malevolence could make it. In ordinary prudence and self-defence she must secure the first word; only the unfortunate part of it was that she would have to begin by admitting that nothing except considerations of prudence and self-defence had induced her to speak at all. The task that lay before her was not a pleasant one, and it was rendered tenfold more unpleasant by the fact that she had learnt to despise so heartily the man to whose reproaches she would be bound to submit in silence. Had it been in her power to respect John, or even to fear him, the idea of attempting to justify herself in his eyes would

have been less repugnant to her ; but, as it was, she felt that it would be impossible to lay anything beyond a bald and crude statement of the truth before him. There was just one consolatory reflection—that which she had mentioned to Wilfrid—that, come what might, she could not very well be more miserable than she was already.

Being in such a condition of mind, she not unnaturally felt a slight sinking of the heart when John made his appearance at the luncheon-table, though she had been hoping all the way home that he would give her this early opportunity of getting through an ordeal which admitted of no long postponement. Of late he had often absented himself between the hours of breakfast and dinner, and he now made a sort of apology for being in the house, pleading the inclemency of the weather as an excuse. Well, it was a good thing that the state of the weather was such as to render a protracted and desultory discussion of it possible ; for topics of greater personal interest could not be brought forward while

the servants were in the room, and both the husband and the wife were conscious that their respective conversational powers were, for the time being, completely paralysed. However, the frost and the snow and the indications of the barometer and thermometer carried them along, somehow or other, until they were left by themselves ; whereupon Ida, who had made little pretence of eating, rose from the table, saying :

‘Can you spare me a quarter of an hour? I have something to tell you about.’

‘I can spare a great many quarters of an hour, if they are required,’ answered John, with a melancholy smile. ‘Shall we go into the drawing-room, or will you come into my den?’

‘It doesn’t matter. Well, your room will be best, perhaps ; I dare say you want to smoke.’

John had a short black pipe which had been his friend and solace during the time of his exile. After filling and lighting it —always with the same apologetic air which

his wife found so irritating—he turned his back to the fire and stood, looking inquiringly at her. It is a queer but indubitable fact that some men can afford to smoke a pipe, just as some can afford to wear the oldest and shabbiest of clothes, whereas others cannot; perhaps it was a sign of the deep and unreasoning prejudice whereby Ida's mind was warped that she said to herself, as she watched her husband, that one must be a gentleman to be included in the former category. Since she did not break silence for a moment or two, John thought it incumbent upon him to help her out.

‘I suppose,’ he observed, ‘it is about Wilfrid and Miss Stanton that you want to speak to me.’

‘Yes,’ she answered; ‘partly about them, but principally about him and—and myself. I dare say the shortest plan will be to start at the beginning. A woman named Viccars came here after breakfast this morning and asked to see me; I need not tell you what her errand was.’

John shook his head. 'I am afraid there is nothing to be done for her,' he answered. 'She may have been hardly used; but unfortunately very few people have any sympathy to spare for women in her position, and if I were called upon to advise her, I think I should have to recommend, in her own interests, that she should hold her tongue.'

'I have no doubt you would,' returned Ida, with an irrepressible gesture of contempt; 'but, as it happens, she is not asking for advice or help. She only wishes—well, she may wish to be revenged too, I shouldn't wonder if she did—but her object in seeking me out was to enable me to save Violet Stanton from falling a victim to one of the most heartless wretches alive. And that I hope and believe that she has put it in my power to do.'

'It may be so; but a man who has behaved as Wilfrid is said to have behaved is not necessarily considered to be a heartless wretch. I should be inclined to rely more upon Miss Stanton's affection for Hubert than upon any



horror that she might feel on hearing what you have to say to her. Do you propose to tell her the story, then? Or will you apply in the first instance to Wilfrid?’

‘I propose to tell her by and by; I have already applied to Wilfrid. I went up to the Court and saw him immediately after the woman had left me.’

‘Ah! you didn’t meet with any success, I am afraid.’

‘No; he felt strong enough to defy me. But I am certain now—and surely, *surely* you must be certain of it too!—that he stole the letter he had written to Mrs. Viccars from you that he drove you out of the country and did all he could to convict you of having killed Mr. Fraser, simply because he knew that, if you had kept that letter and had remained in England, it would have been he, and not you, who would have been ruined.’

John passed his hand across his forehead once or twice, with a gesture of weary despondency. ‘I am not certain of all that,’ he answered at length; ‘I cannot be certain of it.

And even though I were, would my certainty, or yours, carry conviction to anybody else's mind? That, you see, is the only question worth taking into account. I suppose, however, that the poor woman will make her version of the affair public, whether we lend her our countenance or not. I only wonder that she did not do so before.'

'So do I. What you would like to do, then, would be to submit tamely and say nothing?'

'Yes, I think so. I am not conscious of any feeling of enmity against Wilfrid; I might have been angry with him once; but I am not angry now, and, when all is said and done, he is my brother. It certainly did cross my mind that, on Miss Stanton's account, I ought to try and clear up the mystery (if one can call it a mystery) about Jessie Viccars, and I spoke to Wilfrid upon the subject; but I did no good with him, and I doubt whether any good could be done by bringing to light a bygone scandal, which the girl probably wouldn't believe or care to listen to. If she is in love with Hubert, she requires no protection; if

she isn't, we shan't get her to refuse Wilfrid by telling her that he once treated another woman badly.'

'I don't agree with you,' returned Ida; 'but that is of little consequence, for I never expected you to support me, and I can fight Violet's battle single-handed. Now I have something else to say which I know you will not like to hear; but it must be said, because Wilfrid means you to hear it, and he thought he could frighten me into submission by the mere threat of telling you. I don't think I have done anything wrong; only, put it how I may, it will sound to you as if I had done wrong, and perhaps it would have been more straightforward to confess the truth before I was forced into doing so. If I have done wrong in that, I—I beg your pardon.'

She brought out the last words with an obvious effort and with no very penitent ring in her voice.

'My dear,' said John quietly and wonderingly, 'I will answer for it beforehand that you have done nothing wrong.'

‘ Ah, you used not to be so sure of me ! I suppose you have changed ; you don’t seem able to care much about anybody or anything now. Well, I must say what I have to say ; it won’t take long. I wonder whether you remember what I told you when I consented to marry you ? ’

‘ Perfectly well. You told me that you were not in love with me ; and, to the best of my recollection, I replied that it would have been very strange if you had been. I am not, and I never was, the sort of man with whom you could possibly have fallen in love.’

‘ I don’t know about that ; but there was a reason which made it impossible for me to love you, and if I had been straightforward, I suppose I should have mentioned it at the time. My excuse is that it is rather a hard thing to admit that you are in love with a man who has thrown you over, and I believed then that Arthur Mayne had thrown me over. You may have heard—most likely somebody has been kind enough to inform you of it—that I was very near marrying Arthur Mayne when

he suddenly, and without any explanation, left the place. On the very eve of my wedding-day he returned, and then I found out that both he and I had been deceived by—by those who may have thought that they were doing us a service in parting us. It was too late for me to draw back. I told him so, and I married you, and I tried to do my duty to you. Afterwards came that trouble about Mr. Fraser, for whom I hope you believe now that I never had any sort of feeling beyond a lukewarm sort of friendship. I was dull and lonely, and he enlivened my solitude a little: that was the whole history of our intimacy from first to last.'

John made a sign of assent. 'I was an utter lunatic to be jealous of the man,' said he in contrite accents.

'Yes; I think you were. But you would not have been a lunatic if you had been jealous of Mr. Mayne; for I never forgot him, though I can honestly say that I did my best to put him out of my thoughts. Of course I never had any news of him, direct or indirect; I

took it for granted that he had forgotten me, or at any rate that he would very soon forget me. It was not until after you had caused the news of your death to be announced to us that I met him again ; and then——’

‘ And then, as was only natural, you and he agreed to let bygones be bygones. I see.’

John spoke so calmly and quietly that his wife hardly knew whether any sarcasm was intended or not. She would have found it more easy to defend herself if he had taken up another tone. As it was, the nature of the case compelled her to assume an attitude of self-defence, although she had not been attacked.

‘ I had every right and every reason to think that I was free,’ she went on. ‘ At first I would not accept him, because it seemed to me that, as the widow of a supposed murderer, I should bring some sort of disgrace upon him by becoming his wife ; but after Barton’s admission of his guilt there was an end to that objection ; and so——’

‘ Yes ? ’

‘ And so I yielded ; although our engage-

ment was not publicly announced. If it had been announced, I should have been bound to tell you about it; as it was known to nobody except ourselves, I thought I was entitled to hold my peace. I won't pretend that consideration for you had anything to do with my silence; I should have remained silent to my dying day if Wilfrid hadn't threatened to enlighten you. At least you know the whole truth now; I am not sure that you would have heard the truth from him.'

Having made an end of speaking, she stood, with downcast eyes, awaiting the storm which she had fully expected her words to arouse. But no storm came. Instead of that, John's hand was laid gently upon her shoulder, and it was John's voice that said, in a tone of infinite tenderness and compassion: 'My poor girl, what can I do for you? Unless I hang myself or cut my throat, what can I do? It is useless to plead that when I told that lie about my being dead I thought it would be a perfectly harmless one; I had no business to think so; if I had not been blinded by

selfishness I should have known better. And now nothing that I can say or do can ever atone for the injury that I have done you. There is just one way, and only one, in which I can serve you; and that is to relieve you from the suffering of seeing me every day. Even that I can't do without asking you to give me a little money. Let us say £200. With £200 I can go back to America and earn my living, and I will solemnly promise you that I will never return. There will be no need for any scandal about it; plenty of men go off to distant countries nowadays, leaving their wives behind them, and if they don't reappear in a short time, people forget their existence. I wish I could tell you how sorry I am—though there's no good in being sorry.'

Ida looked at him for a moment and then broke into passionate weeping. 'Oh, don't talk like that,' she exclaimed; 'you break my heart! It is I, not you, who have been selfish. I begin to understand now—I think I understand. It is that you are good, not that you



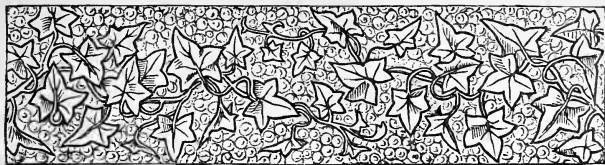
are a coward, as I was base enough to imagine. You are so good that you can forgive me, and even Wilfrid. I am not like that—I never could be!’

John laughed, though there were tears in his eyes too. ‘I don’t claim to be good,’ said he; ‘I do claim to love you, though I have given you very little proof of it so far. I am not sure that I love Wilfrid; only I would rather not have any hand in harming him. I may be mistaken; but I have a very strong conviction that it won’t be necessary for you or me to harm him, and that he may be safely left to the tender mercies of Miss Stanton and Jessie Viccars. Well, now about that £200: can you spare as much?’

‘No,’ answered Ida, with a catch in her voice; ‘I can’t spare it, and I can’t spare you either. Will you give me another trial, John? You know everything now; you know what I can’t do; will you let me try to do what I can? After all, we are husband and wife, and it ought not to be impossible for us to live together.’

It is not easy to define moral impossibilities, nor is it so simple a matter as it may seem at first sight to set limits to the amazing vitality of hope. Evident though it was to John that his wife never would and never could love him, he had given her his word, before she left the room, that he would not sail for America until she asked him to do so.





## CHAPTER XLVII

### JOHN'S FINAL ACT OF FOLLY

IF emotions, or the immediate effects of them, could be rendered lasting, this world would be an even more curious place of abode than it is ; but, fortunately or unfortunately, emotions are by their very nature ephemeral, and although every now and again they may result in some noble or generous action, they can hardly furnish any mortal with a sufficiently solid foundation upon which to construct a changed habit of life and thought. And so, notwithstanding Ida's newly-born admiration for her husband and the genuine remorse with which she looked back upon her past misconception of his character, it did not take her very long to realise that the compact into which they had entered was practically unworkable. Of course, like so many other practically unworkable

things, it would have to be worked somehow ; but it could never work smoothly ; the shadow of the man whose name it would be impossible for either the husband or the wife to mention again must always stand between them ; and it was easy to foresee that John's magnanimity and delicacy would prove obstacles rather than aids to the establishment of anything resembling a happy partnership. However, it was some comfort to feel that she had done with concealments and that her duty—in so far as it was within her capacity to perform it—was simple enough. Henceforth she must be guided entirely by John's wishes and injunctions, little though these might commend themselves to her personal approval.

She made a voluntary and unconditional act of submission to him, undertaking to adopt no hostile measures against Wilfrid without his sanction and to let that malefactor escape scot free, if he should so decide ; whereupon John thanked her with as much gratitude as if her clemency had been displayed towards himself. In accordance with anticipation, Wilfrid pre-

sented himself at the White House on the following morning ; and a sorely puzzled man Wilfrid was when, after he had said what he had to say, his brother observed calmly :

‘ Yes ; I knew all that before. I have no complaint whatsoever to make against my wife, who has been perfectly frank with me, and I am sure you won’t distress me by referring again to matters which it is almost as painful to me as it would be to her to hear discussed by outsiders. You speak of her as your enemy, and, taking the view that she does of your conduct, she can hardly be expected to feel any great affection for you ; but I am authorised to say on her behalf that she does not intend to act as your enemy. I believe she thinks, as I myself do, that Miss Stanton ought to hear Jessie Viccars’s story ; but then it seems pretty certain that she will hear it from the person principally concerned ; so that it is not our business to interfere.’

‘ I suppose I am stupid,’ returned Wilfrid, who was not a little chagrined by the total failure of a weapon which he had been holding in

reserve, with every confidence in its efficiency ; ‘ but I confess that you are incomprehensible to me, John. When you have no reason, or scarcely any, to be jealous you work yourself up into a rage which there is no exaggeration in calling murderous ; when you receive authentic information which might fairly infuriate any ordinary husband, you rub your hands amiably and remark that it really doesn’t signify. I don’t quite know whether to congratulate or condole with you ; but I must take the liberty of warning you that, if you or your wife think cajolery has a better chance of success with me than threats, you are a long way out of your reckoning. I make you welcome to the admission that I would rather Jessie Viccars didn’t relate her harrowing tale to Miss Stanton ; only, as you are apparently encouraging her to do so, you must not expect me to thank you for your personal forbearance or to believe very profoundly in your affectation of goodwill.’

‘ There is no affectation about it,’ said John ; ‘ I wish you no evil, and I shall not, unless I am

forced, open my lips upon the subject of the missing letter. Supposing that I were forced, all I could affirm would be that I had no recollection of giving it up to you and telling you to burn it. I suppose it would be almost impossible to give you any insight into my feelings; but, if you will take my word for it, I ask nothing better than to be allowed to live at peace with you and with the rest of the world. I don't wish you to marry Miss Stanton, and perhaps I may as well say, just for this once, what I shall never say again—that I doubt whether you have been a very true friend to me in the past. But that is all: what is done can't be undone, and if you are ready to pass the sponge over it, so am I.'

It would indeed have been impossible to convey to Wilfrid any idea of the state of mind which could prompt such a speech as that. He disguised his bewilderment to the best of his ability, shook hands with his brother and departed, after giving utterance to a few unmeaning amiabilities. John evidently knew or suspected all that there was to know or

suspect; yet he 'asked nothing better' than to keep his knowledge or suspicions to himself, shake hands and be friends! The only reasonable explanation of such behaviour was that John was a downright idiot. Well, to be sure, he had never been overburdened with brains.

Ida, on being informed of the upshot of the interview, abstained from any comment upon it, merely asking whether she might be allowed to write a few lines to Mrs. Viccars, to whom some intimation of the intentions of the family seemed to be due.

'Of course you will do exactly what you please and think best about that,' was John's reply; 'but if you care for my opinion, I should say that the wisest plan would be to tell her no more than that we don't see our way to move in the matter. Her next step, no doubt, will be to call either upon Wilfrid or upon Miss Stanton.'

'Her next step,' thought Ida, 'will be to call upon Wilfrid, who will talk her over, just as she foresaw that he would, and the end of it will be that Violet will be kept in ignor-



ance of what ought, in common justice and decency, to be revealed.'

But she did not say this aloud: she dutifully wrote the letter which it had been suggested to her that she should write, and awaited events with a mental reservation to the effect that, if the worst came to the worst, she must obtain John's leave to relate the circumstances to Violet. Not even the obedience that she owed to her long-suffering husband could justify her in conniving at the betrayal and the hoodwinking of her friend.

For several days, however, her friend made no sign, nor did Mrs. Viccars think fit to acknowledge the receipt of a communication which might have been expected to draw some reply, friendly or otherwise, from her; so that it looked very much as if Wilfrid was to be allowed to triumph all along the line. This prospect, it need scarcely be said, was a bitter one to Ida, and perhaps she did not relish it any the more because she could neither talk about it nor let her sentiments be divined. John was no doubt admirable; but even if he

had been a saint, he would have goaded his fellow-saints into swearing at him. It was not only that his uncomplaining resignation was misplaced, but that it was so absurdly incongruous ! A meek-eyed woman, with a face like a Madonna, may advance far along the road towards martyrdom without arousing the ire of lookers-on ; but when a great, broad-shouldered fellow, with a red beard, assumes the same part it does seem almost time to remind him that he is, after all, a man. The reader will be glad to hear that Ida not only abstained from expressing such sentiments as these, but that she did not so much as permit herself to formulate them inwardly. Nevertheless they were present to her in an unformulated shape, and they added in no small degree to the burden which she knew that she would have to carry to her grave.

Meanwhile, John, debarred from equestrian exercise by a hard and persistent frost, was, through the same agency, provided with an excellent pretext for pursuing that policy of self-effacement which he conceived

to be incumbent upon him. There was a sheet of artificial water in the Chaine Court grounds which, when the ice was strong enough to bear, had always been thrown open to the skaters of St. Albyn's and its vicinity, and although John was no very accomplished performer, he possessed a pair of old skates, of which at this time he made diligent use all the day long. Once or twice he ventured, in a deprecating, tentative fashion, to hint that it might amuse his wife to accompany him; but Ida did not skate, did not care to stand about in the cold and candidly confessed that she had no wish to form one of a crowd some members of which might not impossibly assail her with troublesome queries.

'If there were any chance of my meeting Violet Stanton, I think perhaps I would go,' she remarked; 'but most likely she hates a frost too much to take any advantage of it as a substitute for hunting, and, upon the whole, I dare say it is as well that we shouldn't meet. If we did, I couldn't say

what I should like to say to her, and she can't have anything to say to me, or she would have let me know.'

One day, however, John returned to luncheon for the express purpose of mentioning that he had left Miss Stanton, together with a large party of her friends, on the lake, where they proposed to remain until nightfall.

'She asked after you,' he added, 'and I rather fancied from her manner that she wished to speak to you. Would it bore you very much to walk back with me presently? This will be our last day's skating, I expect; for the wind has backed into the south-west and the glass is falling fast.'

'It will not bore me in the least,' answered Ida; 'but what am I to say to her? How much may I say?'

'Hadn't you better let that depend upon what she may say to you? If she has seen Mrs. Viccars, there will be nothing to conceal; if she hasn't, I think that, supposing I were in your place, I should confine myself to

advising her very strongly to follow the dictates of her own heart and conscience. Nobody could complain of you for giving such advice as that.'

Ida thought that, if anybody had the audacity to complain of her for going a great deal farther, she might still count upon being acquitted by her own heart and conscience; but, true to the rule of conduct which she had laid down for herself, she only replied :

'Very well; I will do as you wish. Only I do hope and trust that Wilfrid has not bought that unfortunate woman off.'

'I don't think he has,' said John, with a faint smile; 'I don't think he could. He was skating this morning—what a splendid skater he is! I always think that Wilfrid is the most graceful fellow I ever saw in my life—and it struck me that Miss Stanton wasn't inclined to give him any encouragement. He spoke to her several times; but she answered him very drily, and she was evidently determined to keep

out of his way. I suspect that Jessie Viccars has been with her.'

For once, John's honest, short-sighted comprehension of the actions and motives of his fellow-creatures had not misled him. No sooner had Ida joined the throng of young men and maidens who were congregated on the shores of the lake, and who had just been regaled by the hospitable lord of the manor with a hot luncheon, served in a tent erected for that purpose, than Violet hastened to meet her, and, taking her by the hand, drew her aside.

'What is the meaning of all this?' the girl exclaimed. 'What are you and your husband thinking about? Is it possible that you can have been talked over into keeping silence when you know perfectly well that you have been made the victims of the most cruel and cold-blooded plot that ever was devised! As I told that unhappy Mrs. Viccars, it is nothing to me; I refused Mr. Chaine before I ever heard a word of this disgraceful story. But surely it ought

to be something to you! I can't understand your having written such a letter to her as you did.'

It must be confessed that Violet did not understand her friend's forbearance much better even after the full explanation with which Ida now felt free to furnish her. Nothing could be more obvious than that John Chainé had been deliberately and shamefully deceived, nor could there be the shadow of a doubt but that a full disclosure of the circumstances would render Wilfrid's position morally untenable, though from a legal point of view he might be secure against any attack.

'And if, as you say, you have learnt at last to appreciate your husband at his true value,' she remarked, 'why don't you insist upon making the rest of the world appreciate him, in spite of himself?'

'Well, because he doesn't wish it,' answered Ida. 'That may not be the best of all possible reasons; but it is sufficient for me. You don't know—nobody but myself can

ever know—how good he has been to me, and the very least return that I can make to him now is to obey him without arguing about it. Perhaps he is in the right, too. The only thing that made me long to disobey him in this case was my fear that you might be induced to accept Wilfrid, in ignorance of what he really is. But, thank God! that danger no longer exists. And now, as you have taken upon yourself to lecture me, I think I may be allowed to return the compliment and say a word or two to you for your good. Don't you think that poor Hubert has shown enough patience and steadfastness by this time, and that——'

'Oh, that is quite over and done with,' interrupted Violet. 'I have refused him also—refused him finally and irrevocably.'

Ida laughed. 'Refusals of that kind are never irrevocable,' she remarked.

'Sometimes they are. He understands that I care for him, but that I won't marry him because he isn't rich enough. In order that he might make no mistake about it,



I told him that I should most likely end by marrying somebody else — possibly even his brother. I wanted to convince him that I was not worthy of his regard, you see; and, without vanity, I believe I may boast of having carried out my intentions. You may depend upon it that his is a complete and permanent cure.'

'What rubbish! Perhaps, being a man, Hubert may have been simple enough to take you at your word; but you will hardly expect *me* to believe that, if you had really wanted to dismiss the poor fellow, you would have let him know that you cared for him. I shall make a point of seeing him soon and enlightening his innocence. Why isn't he here to-day, I wonder?'

'Probably because he was afraid that I should be here. I don't think your speaking to him would do much good or much harm; but I shall be glad, all the same, if you will allow the subject to drop. I can assure you of this, that I don't regret having refused him, and that I should do the same thing

again, using the same words, if he gave me a second chance—which he never will.'

A prolonged and heated controversy ensued, in the course of which both ladies went perilously near to losing their respective tempers. They were not interrupted; for they had wandered some distance away from the luncheon tent along the margin of the lake, where skating had been resumed, despite the sloppy condition of the ice. Wilfrid, performing complicated evolutions for the benefit of an admiring group, watched them from afar and guessed what they were talking about, but did not attempt to approach them; while John, with whom nobody seemed desirous of holding any converse, scuffled patiently to and fro to keep himself warm, and hoped against hope that his wife was not committing herself to assertions from which it would be wiser to abstain.

'Well, at least we won't quarrel about it,' said Violet at length. 'You think me a monster for declaring that I won't marry a man whom I love because he hasn't enough

money, and perhaps I don't think any too well of you for allowing your husband to remain under the suspicion of being a murderer when you might clear his reputation, if you chose, by a few words. I haven't given you all my reasons for behaving as I have done, and I dare say you haven't given me all yours; most likely it is because we are both women that we don't venture to count upon the credulity of any other woman. Still, although we are women, I don't see why we shouldn't be as good friends as two women can be, and I don't see what we should gain by being enemies. Now I'm going to put on my skates. There is fun to be got out of life, so long as one keeps one's health, if there isn't superlative happiness.'

But such fun as is obtainable by frozen-out fox-hunters was not, it appeared, to fall to Miss Stanton's share that afternoon; for no sooner had she seated herself upon the bank and set to work to fit her skates on to her boots than John, who had been

hovering in her neighbourhood for the last ten minutes, drew near and begged her to abandon her intention.

‘It really isn’t safe,’ he said; ‘I am going to warn all these good people off, and if they won’t listen to me, the chances are that we shall have half of them drowned. Anyhow, you can see for yourself that if the ice isn’t positively dangerous yet, it isn’t fit to skate upon.’

Violet, caring very little about skating, and rejoicing in the prospect of a thaw, at once intimated her willingness to go home; and John, after thanking her and obtaining Ida’s promise that she, too, would refrain from running an unnecessary risk, hastened away to deliver some words of caution to less docile hearers.

Looking back afterwards upon the catastrophe which ensued, and endeavouring to recall the circumstances of its occurrence, Ida was never able to remember more than that she and Violet must have retraced their steps for two or three hundred yards when they

were arrested by a sudden crash and a confused uproar of voices. Then, to their horror, they saw that the ice had given way, and that between fifty and sixty people had been immersed. These, as appeared from subsequent statements made by them, owed their lives solely to the prompt and energetic action of John Chaine, who, notwithstanding their reluctance and the incredulous laughter of his brother, insisted upon driving them before him, like a flock of sheep, towards the shore ; so that they were only plunged into shallow water, and escaped with a fright, and in some instances with a bad cold.

At the time, however, it looked very much as if a frightful calamity had taken place, and such helpless bystanders as Ida and Violet were naturally agitated to the point of losing all their presence of mind. Other bystanders—the servants who were removing the remains of the luncheon, and the men who were employed in taking down the tent—not being helpless, kept their wits about them and rendered what assistance was required ; so that

when John, breathless and dripping, rejoined his wife, he was able to say :

‘ Well, thank Heaven, we’ve got out of that better than we deserved ! There wasn’t much time to spare, though. Where is Wilfrid ? Have you seen him ? ’

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when a labourer rushed up to him, exclaiming, ‘ The Squire’s in the water, sir !—right out there in the middle of the lake. O Lord, O Lord, what a bad job ! We can’t never get to him—not without he can keep hisself afloat till we run the boat down. ’

John’s coat and boots were off in less than a minute. Ida saw him run across the yard or so of unbroken ice which fringed the land ; she saw him throw himself into the water ; she saw him strike out towards a dark object which the waning light just enabled her to distinguish as the head of a man ; she saw him reach it. Then it seemed to her that there was some sort of struggle, that John was being dragged down ; then somebody—whether it was herself or not she could not

tell—screamed aloud. The next thing of which she was fully conscious was that she was being led away by her father, who had his arm round her and was saying :

‘Come home with me, my dear ; this is no place for you. Everything that can be done will be done ; but it is impossible that the bodies should be recovered to-night, I fear. Until the ice has melted, no steps can be taken. Try to compose yourself ; try to remember that your poor dear husband has died the death of a hero.’

The Dean of St. Albyn’s, it may be assumed, no more knew what he was saying than most people know in moments of sudden and unexpected crisis ; but he probably felt, as most people feel, that it was necessary to say something and that it did not in the very least signify what he said. As for Ida, she suffered herself to be drawn away without resistance or remonstrance. Her husband had been drowned before her eyes ; but she was not conscious of having seen him drowned, nor was she able to recall any

of the details of that swift tragedy even when a description was subsequently given to her of how Wilfrid had insanely clutched and pinioned his would-be rescuer, how John had vainly attempted to free himself from that death-grip, and how, after a short contest, both brothers had been drawn beneath the ice and had perished. She was assured that every effort had been made to save them ; but, as a matter of fact, little had been done, because nothing could be done. As the Dean had predicted would be the case, it was not until the following day that their bodies were recovered, locked together in an embrace which, to some of the survivors, may have seemed to present a terrible and ghastly example of the irony of fate.

Others, however, immediately started a legend, which has now obtained pretty general acceptance in the neighbourhood, that the two brothers had loved one another in life and might be accounted fortunate insomuch as that death had not divided them. The Dean, indeed, preached a very beautiful and touching



sermon upon that theme, which, in deference to the solicitations of numerous friends, has since been printed, and may be purchased of any of the St. Albyn's booksellers at the low price of one shilling.





## CHAPTER XLVIII

### THE FORCE OF CIRCUMSTANCES

ON a fine, sunny afternoon, some three months after the occurrence of the catastrophe related in the last chapter, Violet Stanton was sitting, all by herself, in the garden of one of those Cannes villas which, during the cold season, are for the most part tenanted at an exorbitant rental by members of the British aristocracy and plutocracy. Cannes is not really very much warmer than the south and west of England; its villas are seldom, if ever, provided with plate-glass windows, hot-water pipes or coal fires; it is scarcely worth anybody's while to leave a comfortable home for the sake of its uncertain and treacherous climate. Still it is fashionable; a certain class of people may count upon meeting a certain number of their friends there, and there is no denying that the

sun, when it does shine in the south of France, is a real one. For these reasons—for the two first rather than for the last, perhaps—Lady Elizabeth Chaine had temporarily expatriated herself, and for other reasons equally comprehensible she had taken Violet Stanton with her as the companion of her exile. The simultaneous and appallingly sudden death of her two sons had of course been a terrible shock to the old lady; it had caused her to feel more alone in the world than she had felt before, and it had prompted her to make a suggestion which had been willingly enough accepted. Both Violet and her mother had thought it eminently desirable that the former should leave England and all its associations for a time, while Lady Elizabeth had declared, with evident sincerity, that if anything could console her in her affliction it would be the society of one whom she had always regarded with affection, and towards whom she had at one time hoped to stand in an even closer relation than that of a friend.

Violet, therefore, was contemplating the

blue, sunlit expanse of the Mediterranean on that March afternoon, and was saying to herself that she had no earthly right to be depressed and out of spirits. What was there to grumble at? She had, to be sure, led a rather dull life of late, it being manifestly impossible for her chaperon to take any part in the gaieties of the place; but, after a quiet, informal fashion, she had seen a good many people, and Lady Elizabeth had been kindness itself, and there were roses in the garden, and there was a sun overhead, and she had not been called upon more often than was natural and reasonable to acquiesce silently in the praises of the late member for the St. Albyn's division. Of the dead nothing but good should be spoken (perhaps that was why poor John's name was never mentioned); and if she could not agree that Wilfrid had been a model son and a model brother, she was at all events not concerned to assert the contrary. But what about Hubert, who was now the owner of Chaine Court, and who, she had been given to understand, intended to give up soldiering,

as every gentleman who is possessed of considerable landed estates ought to do? It was, of course, impossible for her to marry Hubert—a hundred times more impossible than it had been under previous conditions. She had rejected him upon the specific ground of his indigence, and although it might seem a logical inference that she should now accept him upon the ground of his wealth, nobody out of a lunatic asylum ever expects a woman to be logical. Moreover, as a matter of detail, he had not repeated his offer; so that she had been allowed no chance of pointing out to him what a gross insult such a repetition must necessarily be. It is not impossible that this omission on his part may have had something to do with her present state of dejection; for one does not altogether enjoy being despised, however willing one may be to acknowledge that one's conduct has, upon the face of it, merited contempt.

Still it will be readily understood that Violet had to account to herself for her discontent with life and with the world upon

some other hypothesis than that, and there was nothing strained or unnatural in her conclusion that she was in the dumps owing to lack of wholesome physical exercise. While she was wearing cotton gowns and affecting to luxuriate in a poor imitation of summer under the shelter of the Maritime Alps, hounds were running far away in Southshire ; brooks, swollen by the February rains, were trying the mettle of those noble animals whose courage, sympathy and generosity so infinitely exceed the qualities which pass by those high-sounding names among men ; glory was being honestly earned, and all the miserable pettinesses of civilised existence were being swept away for a time from the minds and memories of happy fox-hunters.

‘What a fool I was to leave them !’ sighed Violet ; ‘why couldn’t I stay at home, and go my own way, and leave people who don’t seem to have so much as noticed my absence to take care of themselves ? Hunting is the only thing worth living for, *il n’y a que ça !* But here I am, and here, I suppose, I shall

have to stay until after Easter. I won't do it a second time, though! If I know myself, I shall go down to my grave without ever again setting eyes upon a palm, or a cactus, or a eucalyptus. How ugly they all are when you look at them dispassionately as trees and not as curiosities!

She had just pronounced this rather hasty and unfair mental judgment upon sub-tropical vegetation when a voice, of which the pitch was very familiar to her, said, close behind her ear: 'If you aren't asleep, Miss Stanton, may I make so bold as to shake hands?'

Violet started to her feet. 'Good gracious!' she exclaimed, with pardonable irritation, 'where have you sprung from, and what do you mean by making a person jump like that?'

'I didn't spring,' answered Hubert humbly; 'I walked out of the house after I had washed off some of the dirt of that filthy railway journey. They told me you were in the garden, and that my mother had gone out for a drive. Didn't she tell you I was coming?'

Violet shook her head. 'She never said a word about it.'

'Well, I telegraphed to her, anyhow, and she must have expected me, because my room was ready. I suppose you can guess why I have come.'

'Apparently in order to see Lady Elizabeth.'

'No; I haven't come for that purpose, and you know very well that I haven't. I came to see you and to remind you that the only reason you ever gave for driving me away from you doesn't exist any longer. I couldn't speak before; it seemed hardly decent, somehow, to speak when poor, dear old John and Wilfrid weren't cold in their graves; but lately I have been afraid that you might not quite understand my silence, and so—here I am.'

'Didn't it strike you that I also might, in my humble way, have some slight appreciation of the requirements of decency? I refused to marry you when you were poor because you were poor. Did you think that



meant that you had only to become rich in order to be gratefully accepted?'

'I don't see why I shouldn't have thought so; but I don't see any necessity, either, for putting things in that unpleasant way. The only question that is of any real consequence is whether you love me or not.'

'Oh, excuse me; that isn't by any means the only question. You can't truthfully deny that you didn't think my love, such as it was, worth having when we parted in the Precincts that evening; and if it wasn't worth having then, it can't be worth having now.'

'Of course I don't deny that I was angry with you and disappointed in you that evening,' answered Hubert; 'you did your very best to make me think badly of you, and naturally I didn't understand at the time what you were driving at. But since then I have had some talks with Ida, who has opened my eyes, and I know now that it was pure unselfishness, and nothing else, that made you speak as you did.'

'Oh, that is her opinion, is it?'

‘Yes; and, what’s more, I believe her. I certainly don’t and can’t believe that you will throw me over now out of sheer pride and obstinacy. Indeed, I am sure you won’t; because I won’t let you.’

This authoritative young man took speedy measures to prove himself as good as his word. Violet, who could be authoritative too, had many excellent arguments with which to combat him; but she was unable to state these, because he would not give her time. She was vanquished before she well realised that the combat had begun, and all she could say for herself at the expiration of five minutes was :

‘Well, if you ever repent of your bargain, you will have to confess, in common honesty, that you have nobody but yourself to thank for it. You won’t be able to pretend that I ever deceived you.’

‘Oh, that’s all right,’ answered Hubert calmly; ‘it’s quite understood that your reason for marrying me is the same that made you so anxious to marry old Amherst;

and if I haven't got as many loose-boxes as he has, I must see whether I can't manage to add to the stables. Now let's go in and receive my mother's blessing. I heard her drive up to the door a minute ago, and I know she won't take her bonnet off until she has been told that there's no further cause for anxiety. I forgot to mention that she has been urging me to come out here for the last month.'

Lady Elizabeth duly embraced and wept over the young couple. She remarked, with innocent candour, that she had always longed to have Violet for her daughter-in-law, that circumstances alter cases, and that, although she could not, of course, have wished Hubert to marry as a subaltern, she was only too thankful that he should have taken advantage of his changed position to make so admirable a choice.

And indeed the old lady was not far wrong. Circumstances, it must be admitted, do alter cases, control, whether we will or no, the course of our lives, make impossibilities possible, convert imprudence into common sense,

and justify a great deal which might otherwise have remained unjustifiable. However, it was not until long after Hubert and Violet had been married in St. Albyn's cathedral that Ida could be brought to see how entirely justifiable it was on her part to become the wife of her first love. She was impressed with a morbid conviction, which the testimony of eye-witnesses could not shake, that John had not perished involuntarily, and she entertained another conviction, scarcely less morbid, to the effect that she had no right to be happy when she had brought so much unhappiness upon one whom she had only learnt to appreciate too late. On the other hand, she had no reply to make to Arthur Mayne when he pointed out to her that having made one man unhappy is not quite the best of reasons for inflicting the same fate upon a second; so that in the long run his representations achieved the result which they could not very well help achieving.

Neither Mr. nor Mrs. Mayne care to spend very much of their time nowadays in a neigh-

bourhood which has painful associations for both of them. Their home is of necessity in London, and during the long vacation they prefer going abroad to staying with their relations, although they cannot altogether ignore the claims of Chainé Court and the Deanery.

‘One can’t wonder,’ says Mrs. Pickersgill, ‘that they so seldom show themselves in the place and make excuses to avoid dining with their friends when they are here. The relations between them from the first were of a kind which they can hardly recall without some little feeling of shame. And, you know, it has been said—of course I don’t for a moment believe it—but it *has* been said that both her unfortunate husband and his brother committed suicide. In poor John Chainé’s case one can imagine that there may have been a reason; but as for Wilfrid—well, I have heard reports; but it is best not to mention them, now that the whole scandal has been hushed up. And I understand that the woman herself has either been bribed or has thought it prudent to hold her tongue.’

From this it will be perceived that Jessie Viccars abstained, after all, from sullyng the reputation of a dead man, and if a considerable sum of money did find its way from Hubert Chaine's pocket into that of Mr. Fletcher, the generous reader will perhaps be willing to place a lenient interpretation upon the motives which led to that transfer of coin. Mrs. Fletcher has the name of being an excellent dressmaker and is largely employed by the St. Albyn's ladies. As for Mr. Fletcher, he has built himself a villa upon the outskirts of the town, and doubtless enjoys that ease of mind and body to which his professional and domestic virtues entitle him.

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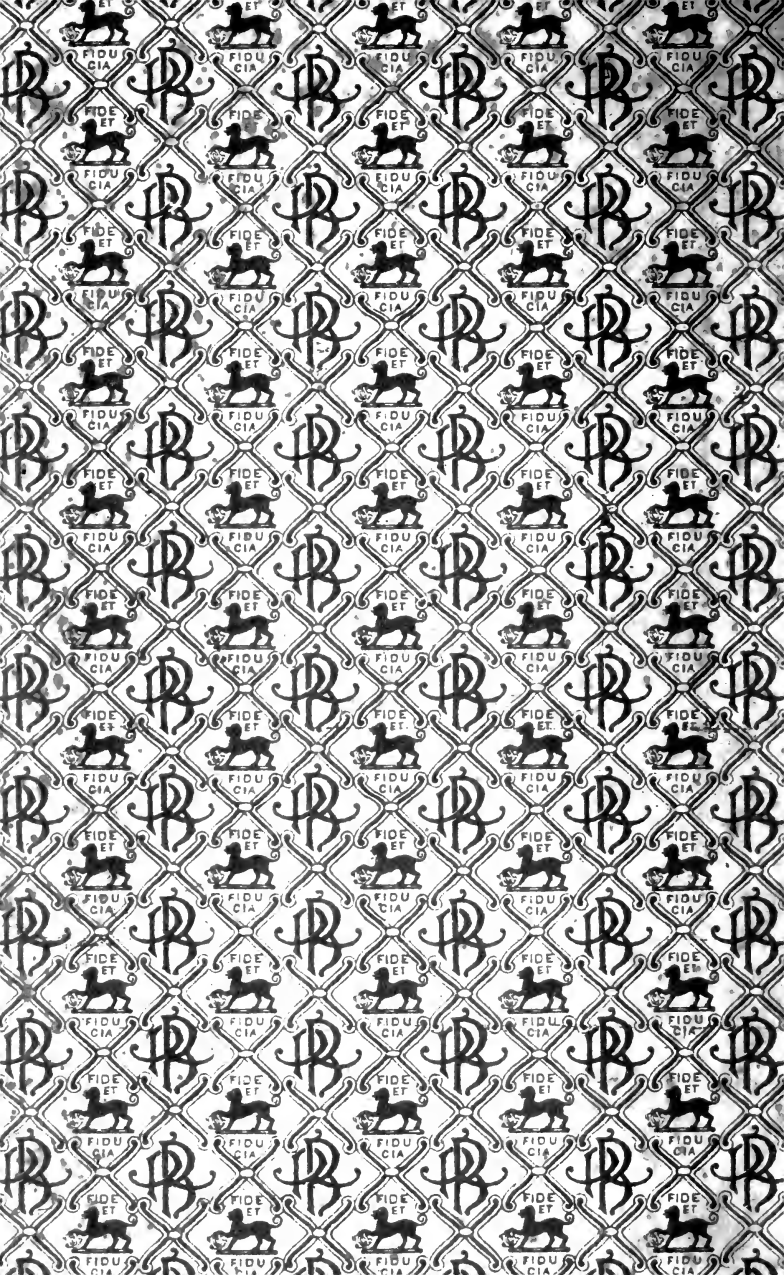
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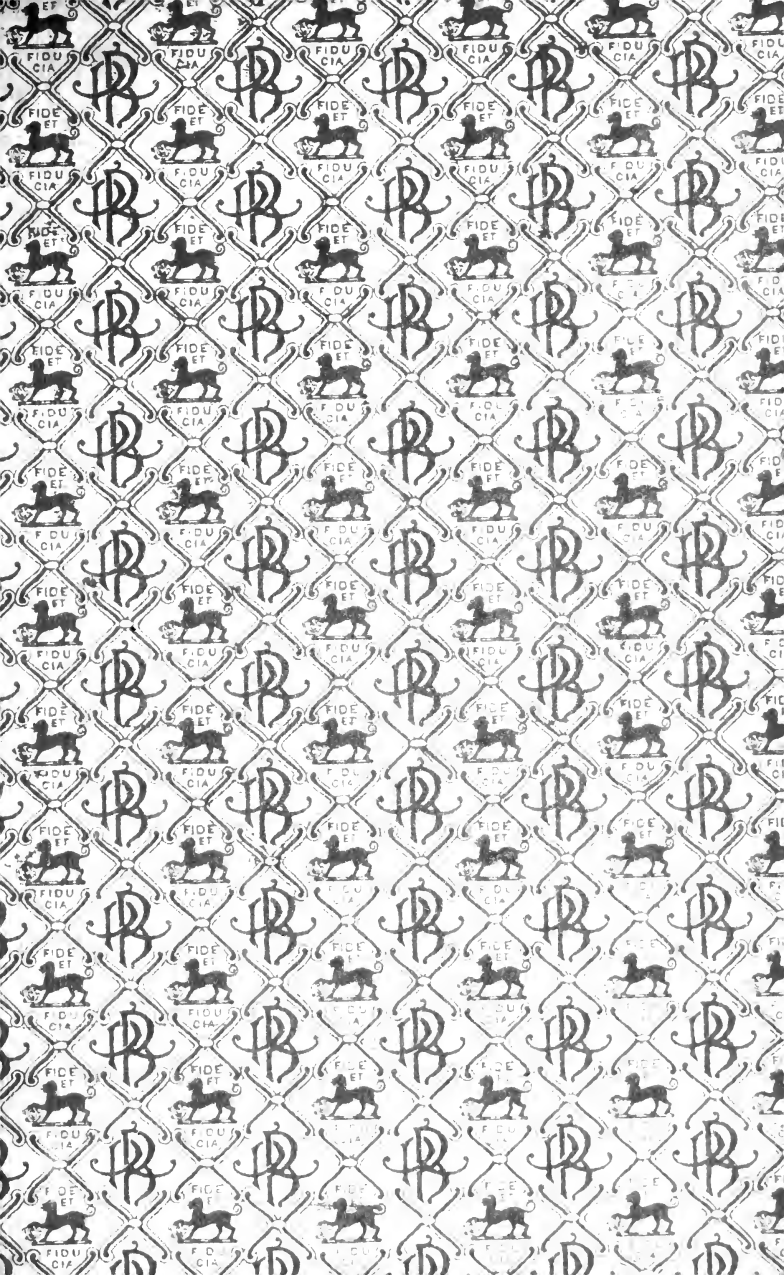
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